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THE LAST OF THE MORTIMERS.

IN TWO VOLUMES.

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THE

LAST OF THE MORTIMERS.

A STORY IN TWO VOICES,

BY THE

AUTHOR OF "MARGARET MAITLAND."

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IN TWO VOLUMES.

VOL. II.

LEIPZIG

BERNHARD TAUCHNITZ

1862.

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BIBLIOTHECA
REGIA
MONACENSIS.

PART IV.

THE LIEUTENANT'S WIFE.

(Continued.)

THE LAST OF THE MORTIMERS.

CHAPTER IV.

Our fat Italian friend below stairs began to give us great amusement just then. Wherever he went he carried under his arm that square volume as fat as himself, in which Lizzie was at present pursuing her occult and bewildered studies. To see Domenico (for that was his name), coming to a sudden halt straight before you, blocking out all the light from that tiny passage, which Mrs. Goldsworthy called her "hall," and announcing, with a flourish of his dictionary, that he had something to communicate, was irresistibly comic certainly; but it was a little embarrassing as well. Domenico's verbs were innocent of either past, present, or future. I presume he was quite above any considerations of grammar, except that supplied to him by nature, in his own language, and was not aware that such a master of the ceremonies existed to introduce him to the new tongue, which the poor fellow found so crabbed and unmanageable. I have heard of people managing to get on in foreign countries with a language composed

of nouns and the infinitive of verbs (I honestly confess, that when I heard this story first, I had very vague ideas of what the infinitive of a verb was); a primitive savage language containing the possibilities of existence; eating, drinking, and sleeping; but quite above the conventional uses of conversation. Domenico's ambition was far higher, but his information was absolutely confined to those same infinitives. He knew the word only as it stood in the dictionary — what were tenses and numbers to him? But you will perceive that a conversation conducted on these principles was necessarily wanting in precision, and that the conversing persons did not always understand each other with the clearness that might have been desired.

One clear spring morning, a few days after the party, I was going out about household affairs, when Domenico stopped me on the way to the door. He had his coat off, and the immense expanse of man in shirt-sleeves, which presented itself before me, cannot be expressed by description. As usual, he was smiling over all his face; as usual, his red lips and white teeth opened out of his beard with a primitive fulness and genial good-humour; as usual, he seized his beard with one hand as he addressed me, opening out his big dictionary on the table with the other. "Signora," cried Domenico, "the master my — me, of me," first pointing at himself, and then, to make assurance sure, boxing his chest emphatically, "the my master; — Signora understand? — come back."

"What?" I cried, "he has come back, has he, Domenico?"

Domenico nodded a hundred times with the fullest glee and rapture. "I — me — Domenico," he cried, again boxing himself, that there might be no doubt of his identity, "make prepare."

From which I divined that the master was not yet returned; and, nodding half as often as Domenico, by way of signifying my entire content and sympathy, foolishly concluded that I was let off and might pass. However, Domenico was not yet done with me.

"The Signora give little of the advice," said Domenico, with unusual clearness, opening the door of his parlour, and inviting me by many gestures to enter. I looked in, much puzzled, and found the room in all the agonies of change. The carpet had been lifted, and the floor polished, which, perhaps, explained the sounds we had heard for some days. I cannot describe how the mean planks of poor Mrs. Goldsworthy's little parlour, many of them gaping apart, looked under the painstaking labours of Domenico. He had contrived to rub them into due slipperiness and a degree of shine; but the result was profoundly dismal, and anything but corresponding to the face of complacency with which Domenico regarded his handiwork. The fat fellow watched my eyes, and was delighted at first with my astonishment; but, perceiving immediately, with all the quick observation which our straitened possibili-

ties of speech made necessary, that my admiration was by no means equal to my surprise, his countenance fell. "He not pleases to the Signora," said Domenico. Then he hastened to the corner where the rejected carpet lay in a roll, and spread a corner of it over the floor. I nodded my head again and applauded. Domenico's disappointment was great.

"But for the sommere?" said Domenico with a melancholy interrogation.

"It is never so warm in England, — cold, cold," I said, with great emphasis and distinctness. Domenico heard and brightened up.

"Ah, thank! ah, thank! not me remember. England! ah! Inghilterra! no Italia! ah, thank! the Signora make good."

The Signora was permitted to consider herself dismissed, I concluded by the bows that followed, and I hastened to the door, outstripping, as I thought, the anxious politeness of the fat Italian. But I wronged his devotion: with that light step, which was so ludicrously out of proportion to his enormous figure, he swung out of the room to open the door for me, and accomplished it in spite of my precipitation, taking in his vast dimensions somehow so as to pass me without collision. I went about my business with all the greater lightness after this comical encounter, and a little curiosity, I confess, in respect to the master who was coming home. Harry had heard of him already, as having quite a romantic story attached to him. He had come to

Chester to see some lady whom he was quite confident of finding, and had been hunting all the neighbouring country for her without meeting anybody who knew even her name. It was supposed he had gone to make inquiries somewhere else, and now he was coming home. I got quite interested about it. I pictured him out to myself quite a romantic Italian, of course, with long hair, and a picturesque cloak, and possibly a guitar. I made up a story in my own mind, like that story of the Eastern girl and A'Becket — that prettiest story! I could fancy Domenico's master, not knowing much more English, perhaps, than Domenico, wandering about everywhere with *the name* on his lips; for, of course, it must be a love-story. It is impossible to imagine it could be anything else.

In the evening, when Harry and I were going out for a little walk, Domenico suddenly presented himself again, and stopped us. This time he was beaming broader than ever with smiles and innocent complacent self-content. He invited us into the parlour with a multitude of bows. Harry, who had heard the morning's adventure, went immediately, and I followed him. The room was all in the most perfect tidiness; Mrs. Goldsworthy's hideous ornaments were put in corners, ornaments of any kind being apparently better than none in Domenico's eyes. But the mantel-piece, where the little flower-glasses had heretofore held sole sway, was now occupied by some plaster figures bought from a

wandering image-merchant, whom Domenico had loudly fraternised and chattered with at the door some days before. In the middle was a bust of Dante, upon which the Italian had placed a wreath of green leaves. The walls were covered with cheap-coloured prints in frames — I suspect of Domenico's own manufacture; such prints as people fasten up, all frameless in their simplicity, upon walls of nurseries: gay, bright, cheap, highly-coloured articles, which quite satisfied the taste of Domenico, himself a child in everything but size and years. It was nothing to his simple mind that they had no money value, and I suppose no value in art either. I don't suppose Domenico knew anything about art, though he was an Italian. But he knew about decoration! He had made the walls blush and smile to welcome the new-comer. I trust his master was no artist either, and could appreciate the adornments which made the face of Domenico beam. The good fellow was so pleased that he forgot his dictionary; he burst forth into long explanations, interspersed by bursts of laughter and gestures of delight, in his own tongue. He threw open the door of the little room behind to reveal to us the arrangements of his master's bedchamber. He explained to Harry — at least I have no doubt, by the way he pointed to the carpet, and the frequency of the word Signora, that this was what he meant — all about the carpet and his polished floor. At last it suddenly flashed upon Domenico

that he was spending his eloquence in vain. He rushed to the table where his beloved dictionary reposed; he dashed at its pages in frantic haste, with wild pantomimic entreaties to us to wait. "Is good? good?" said Domenico, with an eager expressiveness which made up for his defective verbs. I applauded with all the might of gestures and smiles; upon which our friend once more opened the door for us. "To-morrow! after to-morrow!" said the good fellow. It was then his master was coming home.

And, I am sorry to say, Harry was rather disposed to laugh at the fat Italian, and to be sarcastic upon his beautiful prints. Harry did not know anything in the world about pictures; but he knew how cheap these were, and that was enough for him, the prose Englishman. I am thankful to say that I soon reduced him to silence. He declared I was savage in good Domenico's defence.

CHAPTER V.

"Mem, he's been at the market," said Lizzie, next morning, "and bought a hen; and he smiles and laughs to himself like to bring down the house."

This was the first bulletin of the important day on which the Italian gentleman was expected home.

The next report was more painful to Lizzie's feelings. "He's been at the chapel," said Lizzie, in a horrified whisper, "and brought hame water to put in the wee bowlie at the maister's bedhead. Oh, did you see it? it has a cross, and — and — a figure on't," said Lizzie, with deep awe, "and a wee round bowlie for the water. What'll yon be for? I'm no sure it's safe to be in the same house."

Lizzie's horror, however, did not diminish her curiosity. After a little interval another scrap of information reached my attentive ear. "He has some veal on the kitchen-table," said Lizzie, "and if he's no' working at it himsel'! A man! cutting away and paring away, and putting the pan a' ready like a woman — and, eh, mem, the wastry's dreadful. He's making holes in't and stuffin' them fu' o' something! Noo he's puttin't on the fire."

That day baby was neglected for the first time. Lizzie was too much excited and interested — not

to say that she had an observant eye, and believed it quite possible that she might receive a hint from this man of all work — to repress her natural curiosity. The next thing she reported was a half-alarmed statement that "he was away out again and left it at the fire; and what if it was *sitting to** before he came hame?" Lizzie's dread of this accident carried her off downstairs to watch Domenico's stew with friendly anxiety. In about an hour she re-appeared again.

"He's come back; and, eh! o' a' the things in the world to think upon, it's a box of thae nasty things he smokes!" cried Lizzie. "If the gentleman smokes tae, we'll a' be driven out of the house."

Just then, however, another incident occurred which interrupted Lizzie's observations. As she went out of the room, in silent despair, after her last alarming presentiment, somebody evidently encountered her coming up. "I want Mrs. Langham, please," cried Miss Cresswell's voice. "Are you her maid? Oh, I'm not to be shown into the drawing-room. I am to go to *her*. Where is she? — in the nursery? Show me where to go, please."

"But you *maun* go to the drawing-room," said Lizzie, making, as I felt sure from the little quiver in her voice, her bob to the young lady, and audibly opening the sacred door of our state apartment.

* A Scotch expression, which signifies burned in the pan.

"Maun? do you mean must? I never do anything I must," said Miss Cresswell. "There now! make haste; show me where Mrs. Langham is."

"The drawing-room is the place for leddies that come visiting," said Lizzie, resolutely. I'll no let ye in ony other place."

"You'll not let me in! — what do you mean, you impertinent child?" cried Miss Cresswell.

"I'm no a child," said Lizzie. "I ken my duty; and if I was to lose my good place what good would that do onybody? If ye please, ye'll come in here."

The pause of astonishment that followed was evident by the silence; then a little quick impatient step actually passed into that poor little drawing-room. "You strange little soul! but I'll tell Mrs. Langham," cried Miss Cresswell.

"I'm no a soul," said Lizzie; "I'm just like other folk. I'm Mrs. Langham's lass; and she kens me different from a stranger. What name will I say, if ye please?"

This question was answered by a burst of laughter from the visitor, which I increased by throwing open the door of my concealment and disclosing myself with baby in my arms. *He had on his best frock by accident*, which explains my rashness.

"How have you managed it?" cried Miss Cresswell; "why, here is a romance-servant. Dear Mrs. Langham, tell me what you have done to her to

make her so original — and let me have baby. I have not come to make a call, as that creature supposed. I have come as a friend — you said I might. Why must I be brought into this room?"

"It is the most cheerful room," said I, evading the question: "however, Lizzie did not mean to be saucy — she knew no better — but she is the most famous help in the world, though she is little more than a child."

"But then I suppose you must do a great many things yourself?" said my visitor, looking me very close in the face.

I felt my cheeks grow hot in spite of myself, — if Harry had heard her he would have been furious; and I daresay many people would have set this down at once as the impertinence of the rich to the poor. I felt it was no such thing; but still it embarrassed me a little, against my will.

"Do you know some people would be affronted to be asked as much?" said I.

"I know," cried Miss Cresswell, with a little toss of her head, — "people who can't understand how miserable it is not to *have* to do anything. Do you believe in voluntary work? I don't. I can't see it's any good. I can't see the use of it. I should like to cook the dinner and keep the things tidy. I should like to see everything stand gaping and calling for me till I set it to rights. That's the pleasure; but as for saving somebody else trouble, why should

I do it? I can't see any advantage whatever in that."

"Then you would not have me save Lizzie or the landlady some trouble when I can?" said I.

"That is totally a different thing," said the impetuous little girl; then she started, in a manner to me inexplicable, and gazed out of the window near which she was sitting. "Mr. Luigi!" she exclaimed to herself; "now I should so like to know what he wants here."

Just then there was the noise of an arrival at the door; of course it must be the Italian gentleman. "Who is he?" said I. "If it is the Italian, he lives here."

Without making any immediate reply, Miss Cresswell clasped her hands softly together. "How strange!" she exclaimed. Of course it was her own thoughts she was following out, but they seemed sufficiently interesting to rouse my attention. I occupied myself in the meantime with baby, feeling that it would be the merest cruelty to call upon Lizzie at this climax of the day's excitement. And Miss Cresswell leant forward, carefully drawing out the curtain of the window to shade her, and watching the return of Domenico's master. Her colour was a little higher than it had been previously, and she seemed to have quite quietly and comfortably forgotten my presence. I was amused; and, if I must confess it, I was in a condition to be easily affronted

as well. At last she recovered herself, and blushed violently.

"I don't know what you will think of me," she cried; "but it *is* so strange — my godmamma had the last news of his going, and I have the first intelligence of his return. Do you know, there is quite a story about him. He has come here to seek out a lady whom nobody ever heard of; but I do believe, whatever any one may choose to say, that godmamma Sarah knows."

"Knows? Will she not tell, then?" said I.

"Look here," said Miss Cresswell; "she was once a great beauty; and I believe, if you never will tell anybody, that she's a cruel, wicked old woman. There! I did not mean to say half so much. She got so agitated whenever she heard what Mr. Luigi wanted that nobody could help finding her out; but, though I am certain she knows, she will do everything in the world rather than tell."

"But why?"

"Oh, I cannot tell you why. I know nothing at all about it; and remember," cried my imprudent visitor, "that I tell you all this in the greatest secret! I would not tell papa nor any one. I said it to my own godmamma just as it came into my head, and put her into such distress, the dear old soul! My own idea is, that godmamma Sarah does it only for spite; but her sister, you know, has a different opinion, and is frightened, and does not know what she is frightened about. I daresay you

will think me very strange to say so," said Miss Cresswell, again blushing very much, "but I should like to meet Mr. Luigi. I am sure he is somehow connected with my godmothers: I cannot make out how, I am sure; but I am quite certain, however unlikely it may be, that godmamma Sarah knows!"

She seemed quite excited and in earnest about it; so, as all her thoughts were turned that way, I told her our amusing intercourse with Domenico, and what good friends we were. Though she laughed and clapped her hands, she was too much engrossed with her own thoughts evidently to be much amused. She was most anxious to know whether I had heard anything of Mr. Luigi; whether the landlady talked of him; whether I knew how he came to Chester. She told me the story I had heard dimly from Harry in the most clear and distinct manner. On the whole, she filled me with suspicions. If I had not seen her flirting so lately, I should certainly have fancied her in love.

"You know him, then?" said I, after hearing her very steadily to an end.

"Not in the least," she cried, once more blushing in the most violent, undisguisable way. "How should I know him? Don't you know I have no brothers or sisters, Mrs. Langham? and can't you suppose that papa has exactly the same people to dinner year after year? Ah, you are quite different! You have your own place, and can choose your own society — choose me, please, there's a darling! My

name's Sara; quite a waiting-maid's name; let me have baby and come and help you. As for saying he would not come to me, it is nonsense. I will tell you exactly how many friends I have, — God-mamma, who is more than a friend, of course, but no relation; my old nurse, whom I *never* see, and who lives a hundred miles off; and old Miss Fielding, at the rectory. Now only think how much I am alone! You are quite new here; you can choose for yourself — choose me!"

"With all my heart!" said I. I was so much surprised by her ignorance and her free speech, that, though I liked her very much, I really did not know what more to say.

"I suppose, then, I may take off my bonnet?" she said, quite innocently looking up in my face.

If she had rushed to kiss me I could have understood it. If she had declared we were to be friends for ever, I should have quite gone in with her; but, to take off her bonnet! that was quite a different matter. I am sadly afraid I stammered and stared. I wanted a friend as much as she did — but men are such strange creatures. What would Harry say when he came in?

However, Sara Cresswell did not wait till I finished considering. In five minutes after she was sitting on the carpet at the window with little Harry, playing with him. The child was quite delighted. As for me, I was too much taken by surprise to know whether I was pleased or not. Harry was to

dine at mess that night; and, of course, I had only meant to have tea all by myself in the little back room. What was to be done? I am sorry to say I was very much tempted to improvise a dinner, and pretend that it was just what I always did. I think the thing that saved me from this was looking at her with her little short curls; she looked so like a child! Besides, if we were really to be friends, was I to begin by deceiving her? Much better she should know at once all our simple ways.

"You will have no dinner," said I, faltering a little. "Mr. Langham goes out, and I only take tea."

"That is exactly what I like. Dinners are *such* bores!" said Sara, with the air of one who belonged to us and had taken possession.

It was getting quite dark, and the lamps were being lighted outside; of course it delighted baby very much to be held up to see them, as his new nurse held him. As she stood there lifting him up, I put my hand upon her pretty hair. She had quite taken my heart.

"Have you had a fever, dear?" said I.

Sara stared at me a moment, then looked deeply affronted, then burst into a strange laugh. "I forgive you, because you called me dear," she cried, starting off with baby to the other window. I suppose, then, it had not been a fever, — some foolish fancy or other, — and no doubt her friends and acquaintance had pretty well avenged it, without any further question from me.

CHAPTER VI.

NEXT morning I was a little amused and a little surprised to think over all that had happened. The idea of having a friend, who stayed with me till after nine, and helped to put baby to bed, and interfered with Lizzie, and turned over all our few books, and asked all sorts of questions, was the oddest thing in the world to me; and of course when I told Harry I heard all sorts of jokes from him about female friendship, and inquiries how long it would last, which made me extremely angry. Are men's friendships any steadier, I wonder? I should say *male* friendship, to be even with him. Mr. Thackeray is delightful; but he puts a great deal of stuff into young men's heads. I allow *he* may joke if he likes — to be sure, he does not mean half of it — but do you suppose *they* may all follow his example? Not that I mean to infer anything on Harry's part that I could not pay him back quite comfortably. But not meaning Harry in the least, I don't see why I should not do my little bit of criticism. I was just beginning to read books at that time, and everything was fresh to me. All the foolish lads think they are quite as wise as Mr. Thackeray, and have quite as good a right to think themselves behind the scenes. I suppose there never

was anybody who did not like to feel superior and wiser than his neighbours. I would put Domenico's laurel wreath on Mr. Thackeray's head; but I should like to put an extinguisher on the heads of the Thackerians. I should think the great man would be disposed to knock down half the people that quote him, could he only hear, and behold, and note.

However, that has nothing to do with my story. I knew Lizzie must be in a highly excited state from long repression of her manifold gleanings of intelligence respecting last night's arrival; and I went to her as soon as Harry was out lest any explosion should happen. Lizzie, however, looked rather downcast as, baby being asleep, she went about her work upstairs. My first idea was that some jealousy of Miss Cresswell had invaded the girl's mind, but that did not explain all the peculiarities of her manner. She certainly allowed herself to be drawn into an account of Domenico's proceedings, which gradually inspired and animated her; but even in the midst of this she would make a hurried pause, now and then, and listen, as if some painful sound had reached her ear.

"It was a very grand dinner. Eh, I never saw onything like the way he steered, and twisted, and mixed, and watched," said Lizzie; "he maun be a real man-cook, like what's in books; and took up everything separate, six different things one after the ither; and Sally says there was as mony plates as if it had

been a great party; and the minute before and the minute after, what was the gentleman doing but smoking like as if he was on fire; and eh, mem, he maun be a great man yon! Domenico kissed his hand; but after that," continued Lizzie, blushing and turning aside with a strong sense of impropriety, "the gentleman kissed *him!*"

"That is how foreigners do," said I, in apology.

"And after the dinner there was that sound o' their tongues through the house, you would have thought the walls would ha'e been down. Eh, sic language for Christians to speak! but, mem, they're no Christians, they're Papishers — is that true?" said Lizzie, with a little anxiety. "Such a blatter o' words, and no one a body could understand. No' that I was wantin' to understand; but it's awfu' funny to hear folk speakin', and nae sense in't. Eh, whisht! what was that?" cried Lizzie, starting and stopping short in her tale.

It certainly was, or sounded, very like moan of pain.

"What is it, Lizzie?"

"Eh, to think of us speaking of dinners, and sic nonsense! — and, mem, it's a poor man like to dee with pride, and sickness, and starvation! What will I do? What will I do?" cried Lizzie. "If naebody else in the house durst, it maun be me. I'll no keep quiet ony langer — he canna be ill at me that was destitute mysel'. I'll gang and steal the

bairn's beef-tea, and tell him lies, that it's his ain. Mem, let me gang. I canna bear't ony mair!"

I stopped her, however, growing very much excited myself. "What is it? What do you mean?"

Lizzie, who was choking with distress, eagerness, and excitement, pointed her finger up, and struggled to find her voice. It burst upon me in a moment. The poor gentleman in the attic, the threadbare wistful man who went out to dine, had not been visible for some days. Lizzie told me in gasps what the landlady had told her. He was ill; he was very poor; deeply in Mrs. Goldsworthy's debt. They had noticed that his usual work had not been on his table for some time, and that no domestic stores of any kind were in his little cupboard; three days ago he had become too ill to go out; they did not think he had anything to eat, and he would accept nothing from them. All yesterday they had not ventured to enter his room. Sick, starving, friendless — what a picture it was! No wonder he had hungry, wistful eyes. I lost no time as you may suppose. I sent Lizzie flying downstairs for the beef-tea. As for asking whether he would admit me or not, whether he would think it impertinent or not, I never stopped to think. Another of those moans, more audible this time because I was listening for it, thrilled me through and through before Lizzie came back. Bless the girl! in no time at all she had got the whitest napkin to be had in the house

for the tray; and the beef-tea smoked and smelt just as it ought. I was at the door of the room before I thought anything about how I was to excuse myself. By mere instinct I opened the door first; then knocked, merely to warn the inmate of my coming, and in another moment stood all by myself in a new world.

Another world! a world of misery, endurance, voiceless passion, and persistence, altogether unknown to me. He was lying on some chairs before the fireplace, supporting his gaunt shoulders against the end of his bed, — before the fireplace, in which there was no fire, nor had been. It was trim and well-blacked, and filled up with faded ornamental chippings of paper. His table was beside him, and he leaned one arm on it; nothing on the table, not even a book, except some old pens, blotting-paper, and an ink-bottle. His coat buttoned close up to his neck, with dreadful suggestive secrecy, plainly telling how little there was below; and the hungry sad eyes, glaring wolfish and frenzied out of his worn face. He gave a great start when I came in, and either in passion or weakness thrust one of the chairs from under his feet, so that it fell with a great noise on the floor. The sound and the movement made my heart beat. But he took no further notice, only stared at me. I went forward and put the tray before him on the table, uncovered the basin, placed everything within his reach. All the while he stared at me, his eyes contracting and di-

lating as I never saw the eyes of any human creature before. I scarcely think he was a human creature at that moment; at least he was holding to his manhood only by that frantic hold of pride, which hunger and misery were rending before my very eyes. He began to tremble dreadfully; the sight of the food excited his weakness; but he tried to resist till the last gasp.

"Who are you? and how dare you come to my room and intrude upon me!" he said hoarsely, and trembling like a palsied man.

"I am your fellow-lodger. You used to notice my baby when you went downstairs; and they told me you were ill, and could not go out. When one is ill there is nothing so good as beef-tea," said I, trembling a good deal myself; "even if you cannot eat, you might drink a little, and it would refresh you. Do pray try, it will do you good."

"And how do you know?" he said, trembling more and more, till his very utterance was indistinct, "that I cannot have beef-tea or — or anything else I like, of my own. Ah!" he ended, with a sharp cry. He put forward his hand towards it; then he stopped in a dreadful spasm of resistance, and glared at me. I obeyed my first impulse, and went out of the room hurriedly. He would not take it while I was there.

In about five minutes after I went back again with some coals and wood, in one of Mrs. Goldsworthy's old coal-scuttles. I thought I saw how to

manage him — never to ask permission or make apologies, but simply to do what was needful. He had emptied the basin, I saw at a glance, and had a piece of bread in his hand, which he put down when I came in. He said nothing, but stared at me as I lighted the fire. When my back was turned to him I fancied he made another stealthy application to the bread. He would hide the full amount of his misery if it were possible; but it was only a partial victory he could obtain over himself.

"Who, who are you?" he said at last. "You — you are a lady, eh? It is not your business to make up fires?"

"Yes," said I, as cheerfully as I could; "but we are poor; and when one has not much money one has many things to do."

At this the poor gentleman gave a great groan. Then, after a little, gasped, in broken words, "Thank God! creatures like you don't know the truths they say."

I understood him at once. "No," said I, "it is quite true; but God knows all about it, that is a comfort always. Don't you think if I put the pillows behind you you would be more comfortable? Try this. I am quite sure it is better so."

"Ah! but how do you know I can't have pillows as I please, and whatever I want of my own?" cried the jealous, delirious pride, waking up again in his big hollow eyes.

"I don't know anything about it," said I; "but you have nobody with you just now. If you will

not send for any friends, you can't help having neighbours all the same."

He said, "Ah!" again, and relapsed into his silent stare. But for the frenzy of desperate want and desperate pride, which only flickered up by moments, he was too far benumbed with want and suffering to do anything in the way of resistance. After I had settled him a little comfortable I went downstairs again, and as soon as baby's second bowl of beef-tea, which had been hastily made to take the place of the first, was ready, I stole that also, and went up with it again. Baby, who was as fat as possible, could quite well do without it; and I remember having read that people, who had been in great want, should get food very often but not much at a time. The poor gentleman was lying with his head on the pillow and his eyes half shut, the light of the fire glimmering over him, and a kind of quiet in his attitude. When he opened his eyes they grew wolfish again for a moment; but he was subdued — the first frenzy was gone. Somehow he did not seem alone any longer, with that dear good charitable fire blazing and crackling, and making all the noise it could, as if to show what company it could be. And this time he actually drew the basin towards him, and ate its contents before me. I went to the little window and cried a little privately. Oh, it was pitiful! pitiful! That morning I am sure he had laid himself down upon these chairs, mad with want, bitterness, and solitude, to die.

CHAPTER VII.

"You, who would not go out to dinner because you could not afford it!" cried Harry, "how do you dare venture on such rash proceedings? It appears to me you have adopted a new member into the family."

"Ah, but it is different," said I; "going out to dinner was a matter of choice, this was a matter of necessity."

"It depends upon how people think," said Harry, "the priest and the Levite were of quite a different opinion; but if you mean to have friends and pensioners, and get rich people and poor people about you, Milly darling, we'll have to think of new supplies. I cannot imagine how it has gone out of my mind all this time. Pendleton actually asked me to-day whether I had heard anything more about your grandfather's house."

"My grandfather's house!" I said; and we both looked at each other and laughed; our removal had put all that out of our heads. Chester, and new places to look at, and new people to see, and just the usual disturbance of one's thoughts in changing about, had betrayed Harry who was so anxious about it, just as much as it had betrayed me.

"I must see after it now in earnest. A thousand

pounds or so, you know," said Harry, with a kind of serio-comic look, "would be worth a great deal to you just now."

And with this he went out. A thousand pounds or so! twenty would have been nice; ay, or ten, or even five, more than just our regular money. However, I only laughed to myself, and went upstairs to my poor gentleman. After all, I am not so sure that he was a gentleman, or at least that he was anything unusual in himself. He was very independent, and want, and a passionate dread of being found out, and made a pauper of, had carried him to a kind of heroism for the moment. But when he got used to me, and consented to let me bring him things, he became very much like other people. He was always eager to get the newspaper and see the news. I carried him up the Chester paper, which Mrs. Goldsworthy took in just now.

When I went into his room, the first thing I saw was two letters on the table. He was just drawing back, and still trembling from his exertion, for he was still very weak. He put the letters towards me with a little movement of his hand.

"I am writing to ask for work; I'm wonderfully steady now, wonderfully steady; if they would only give me work! Ah, it's hard times when a man can't get work," he said.

I glanced at them as he wished me. "Cresswell?" said I; "I think I know his daughter, Mr.

Ward. I'll speak to her; perhaps she can make him help you."

"She can make him do whatever she likes," said my friend, with his wistful eyes; "it'll be well for him if she don't make him do what he'll repent."

"How do you mean?" said I, with some surprise.

"Well!" said my patient, "it's a story I don't understand, and I can't give you the rights of it. I was never more than just about the office an hour or so in the day, getting my copy. You see there's two rich old ladies about half-a-dozen miles out o' Chester, and there's either some flaw in their title, or something that way. I know for certain there was an advertisement written out for the *Times*, for one Mortimer —"

"Mortimer!"

"Yes," he said, looking at me in his eager way. "I suppose it had been some day when he had quarrelled with them, and meant to bring in the true owner; when all of a sudden it was withdrawn, and has never been in the *Times* to this day; and Miss Cresswell after that spent a long time at the Park. Somebody said in the office it was more than likely the ladies would leave their property to her; and to be sure if that was so, it would be none of her father's business to hunt up the right heir."

I felt completely dizzy and bewildered; I kept looking down upon the table, where the letters seemed to be flitting about with the strangest un-

steady motion. "And are the ladies called Mortimer?" I said, almost under my breath.

"Yes; they're folks well known in Chester, though seldom to be seen here," said Mr. Ward; "the youngest one, Miss Milly, is a good creature; the other one, and her name is Sarah, was a great beauty in her day. I remember when I was a lad, we young fellows would walk all that way just to see her riding out of the gates, or driving her grey ponies; they called her the beautiful Miss Mortimer in those days. I daresay now she's as old, and as crazy, and as chilly — but, thank heaven, she can never be as poor, and as friendless, and as suffering — as me."

I could not make any answer for a long time. I stood with my hands clasped together, and my brain in a perfect whirl; these words, Sarah, Miss Mortimer, the Park, going in gusts through my mind. What did it mean? I had come upstairs with a smile on my lips about the fabulous house of my grandfather. Was this the real story now about to disclose itself? I felt for a moment that overwhelming impatience to hear more which makes one giddy when on the verge of a discovery; but I did not want to betray myself to the old man.

"And do you mean," said I, holding fast by the table to keep myself from trembling, "that they are not the lawful owners of their estate?"

"Nay, I cannot tell you that," said my patient, very coolly; "but what could be wanted with an

advertisement in the *Times* for one Mortimer? and old Cresswell holding it back, you know, as soon as it was likely that his girl might get the Park."

"Do you remember what was the Mortimer's name that was to be advertised for? I know some Mortimers," said I, with a little tremble in my voice.

"I can't say I exactly remember just at this moment," said the old man, after a little pause. "It wasn't like a Mortimer name; it was — nay, stay, — it was one of the cotton-spinners' names; I remember I thought of the spinning-jenny directly; something in that way; I can't tell exactly what it was."

I could scarcely stand. I could scarcely keep silent; and yet I durst not, for something that choked the voice in my throat, suggest my father's name boldly to his recollection. I hurried away and threw myself on a chair in my own room. All was silent there; but with just a door between us Lizzie was playing with my boy; and his crows of infant delight, and her soft but homely voice, seemed to break in upon the solitude I wanted. I rose from that retreat, and went down to our little drawing-room. There it was Domenico's voice, round and full, singing, whistling, talking, all in a breath. Nowhere could I get quiet enough to think over the extraordinary information I had just received. Or, rather, indeed it was not either Lizzie's voice, or Domenico's, but the agitation and tumult in my own

mind; the beating of my heart, and the stir and restlessness that rose in me, that prevented me from thinking. Could it be possible that my father's languid prophecy, which Aunt Connor reported so lightly, had truth in it after all? The idea excited me beyond the power of thinking. I went out and came in. In took up various kinds of work and threw them down again; I could do nothing till Harry came in, and I had told him. Then I fancied there might possibly seem some sense and coherence in the news. If this were to come true, then what prospects might be dawning upon us! In this sudden illumination my past dread returned to me, as a fear which has been forgotten for a time always does. The war! if Harry's wife turned out a great heiress, must not Harry himself cease to be a soldier and enter into his fortune? Ah me! but he would not; he would not if I should ask him on my knees; not, at least, till he had taken his chance of getting killed like all the rest. This threw me back, with scarcely a moment's interval, into the full tide of those thoughts which had tortured me before we came to Chester. I got up from my chair and began to walk about the room in the restlessness of great sudden apprehension and terror. All my trouble came back. My fears had but been asleep, the real circumstances were unchanged; even to-day, this very day, Harry might be ordered to the war.

He saw my nervous, troubled look in a moment when he came in; he was struck by it at once.

"You look as you once looked in Edinburgh, Milly," he said, coming up to me; "what is the matter? Something has happened while I have been away?"

"Harry," cried I, with a little excitement, suddenly remembering that I had news to tell him. "I have found the Park and the Sarah; I have found the estate I'm heiress to; I have found out something far more important than that old red-brick house; and, do you know, hearing of this brought everything to my mind directly, all my terrors and troubles. Never mind. I'll tell you what I heard in the first place. It was from my poor gentleman upstairs."

Harry, who had heard me with great interest up to this point, suddenly shrugged up his shoulders, and put his lips together for that disdainful provoking whew! with which men always think they can put one down.

"Oh, indeed, you need not be scornful!" said I; "he writes papers for a lawyer, and had a very good way of knowing. He says Mr. Cresswell had an advertisement all ready to be put into the *Times* some months ago, for one Mortimer, whose name reminded him of a spinning-jenny. But it never was sent to the paper, because Miss Cresswell went out to the Park, and it was thought the ladies would make her their heiress; but it was supposed there was some flaw in their title, and that this Mortimer would be the true heir."

"The Park, and the ladies, and Miss Cresswell,

and it was supposed? By Jove, Milly!" cried Harry, with great vehemence, "do you see how important this is? — have you no better grounds than; it was thought, and it was supposed?"

"You are unreasonable, Harry; I only heard what he had to say; and, besides, it might not be my father, nor the same people at all. *He* could not tell me, I only heard what he had to say."

But this explanation did not satisfy Harry; he became as excited as I had been, but in a different way. He snatched up his hat, and would have gone at once, on the impulse of the moment, to see Mr. Cresswell, had not I detained him. The news had the same influence on Harry that it had upon me. It woke us both out of the happy quiescence into which we had fallen when we came here. We were no longer dwelling at peace, safe in each other's society; once more we were thrown into all the agitation that belonged to our condition and prospects. Harry was a soldier, ready to be sent off any day to the camp and the trenches, gravely anxious about a home and shelter for his wife and child; I, a soldier's wife, ready at any moment to have the light of my eyes torn from me, and my life cut in twain. After the first hurried burst of consultation, we were both silent, thinking on these things. Certainly it was better that we should have been aroused. The reality coming at once, all unapprehended and unthought of, would otherwise

have been an intolerable blow. Now there was little fear that we could forget again.

It was natural that we should return to the subject again and again during this day. Harry drew my father's old books, and the drawing he had laughed at, from his own desk, where he had kept them; and with them the envelope, full of formal documents, which he had written to Aunt Connor for with so much haste and importance, to substantiate my claim to my grandfather's house; there they lay, unused, almost unlooked at. Harry shook his head as he drew them out. We neither of us said anything. We were neither of us sorry that we had forgotten all about it for a time. For my own part, I went away upstairs very like to cry. This information, which had thrown us back into so many troubles, might never come to anything; and even if it did, what difference would that make? Harry, if I was found out to be a king's daughter, would never leave his profession, or shrink from its dangers, while this war lasted. My pleasant forgetfulness was over now. He was looking at this subject in the light he had looked at it before we left Edinburgh; — it would be a home for me.

CHAPTER VIII.

It was an agitated, troubled day. The accidental nature of the information, calmly told to one who was supposed to have no interest in it; the coincidence of the names; the startled feeling we had in thus being suddenly brought into contact with people nearly connected with us, who were unaware of our existence, and of whose existence we had been unaware, acted very powerfully on our imaginations. I don't think either Harry or I had a moment's doubt upon the subject. As to the identity of the persons, certainly none; and I confess that I, for one, received with perfect faith the suggestion that there was a wrong somehow in the matter, and that my father had turned out to be the true heir. It never occured to me to imagine any other reason for the suppressed advertisement; and Mr. Cresswell, whom I had thought at the very climax of respectability, suddenly descended into a romantic lawyer-villain in my excited eyes.

To add to the agitation of my thoughts, Sara Cresswell chose to take that day for one of her odd visits. She came in the afternoon to stay with me till evening. She was clearly quite beyond her father's control; not even subject to a wholesome restriction of hours and meal-times; for she never said

her father was out to dinner on the occasions of her coming, nor accounted in any way for her liberty at his dinner-hour. The little brougham used to come for her at night, with her little maid in it — a sign, I suppose, that the father did not disapprove; but that was all. Only wilful and lawless as she was, I confess I had grown to like her very much. I sometimes lectured her; and once or twice we quarrelled; but she always came back next time just the same as ever. So quarrelling with her was evidently useless. I must say I had a very strange sensation in welcoming her to-day. Could she know her father's base purposes about that Park which, according to all appearances, ought to be mine? Could she have been paying her court to those ladies with the hope of supplanting the true heir? A glance at her face, only too frank and daring always, might have undeceived me; but, of course, I was bucklered up in my own thoughts, and could see nothing else.

"You are ill," said Sara, "or you are worried; or 'tis I have done something. If I have, I don't mind; that is to say, I am very sorry, of course, and I will never do it again. But if you think you will get rid of me by looking glum, you are sadly mistaken. I shan't go. If you won't have me for a friend, I shall come for a servant, and fight it out with Lizzie. Lizzie, will you have me for 'a neebor?' Ah, I'm learning Scotch."

"Eh, that's no Scotch!" cried Lizzie; "ye dinna

ken what it is. I'm, maybe, no that good at learning folk now, for I have to speak English mysel'."

"And Italian, Lizzie!" cried Sara, clapping her hands, and forgetting all about my "glum" face.

Lizzie's elbows and ankles fell almost immediately, and the most extraordinary blush rose on the girl's face. "Eh, but it's funny to hear *twa* speaking't," cried Lizzie, evading the subject eagerly. The truth is, she had got overmuch involved in the delightful excitement of the new language, and in consequence of the ludicrous fascination of the dictionary, by means of which Domenico and she conducted their conversations, had come to like the society of that worthy. When I found him escorting my child-maid and the baby out-of-doors, I thought it was time to remonstrate on the subject; and my remonstrance had woke a certain womanly consciousness in the awkward-sensitive girlish bosom of Lizzie. She was overwhelmed with shame.

Fortunately, the mention of the "twa" diverted Sara's thoughts. She had never ceased to be interested in Mr. Luigi, and I saw a world of questions in her eye immediately. I hurried her downstairs, not feeling able, really, for random talk; and troubled, more than I could express, to think how disappointed Harry would be when he came home full of one subject, expecting to talk it over with me, and found me occupied entertaining a stranger, — a stranger, too, who had something to do with it, who was our

rival, and plotting against us, all unaware of who we were.

However, as it happened, one of the first things Sara's eye lighted upon when we entered the room, was that old drawing of poor papa's, which lay on the table. She was the quickest creature imaginable. She had it in her hand before I knew what she was about. Her exclamation made me start and tremble as if I had been found out in something. Here was another witness giving evidence freely, without any wish or contrivance of mine.

"Why, here is the Park!" cried Sara, "actually the very house! Where, in all the world, did you get it? Have you been there? Do you know them? Why, I thought you were quite strangers to Chester! I never knew anything so odd. Who did it? It is frightfully bad, to be sure, but a staring likeness. Dear Mrs. Langham, where did you get this?"

"I got it out of an old book," said I, with a guilty faltering which I could not quite conceal. "What Park is it? where is it? I do not know the place."

But I am sure if ever anybody looked guilty and the possessor of an uncomfortable secret, it was me at that moment. I turned away from Sara, putting away that envelope with the certificates which Harry (how careless!) had also left on the table. I am sure she must have felt there was something odd in my voice.

"What Park? why, *the* Park, to be sure. Every-

body in Chester knows the Park; and here is an inscription, I declare!" she cried, running with it to the window. "Oh, look here; do look here! It must have been some old lover of godmamma Sarah's. I never saw anything so funny in my life. 'Sarah as I saw her last.' Oh, Mrs. Langham! do come and look at this comical, delightful thing! Isn't it famous? She's as old — as old as any one's grandmother. Who could it be? who could it possibly be?"

"Did you say your godmother?" said I. This was another novel aggravation. Of course I had heard Sara speak of her godmothers; but, somehow, I had not identified them with the ladies who were expected to make her their heir.

But Sara was too much excited and delighted, and full of glee and ridicule, to answer me. She kept dancing about and clapping her hands over the drawing; always returning to it, and indulging in criticisms as free and as depreciatory as Harry's had been. It was getting dark, and I confess I was very glad to sit down a little in the half light, and repose myself as well as I could while she was thus engaged and wanted no attention from me. Just then, however, I heard Harry's foot coming upstairs, and, to my great wonder and almost alarm, somebody else entered with Harry. I could scarcely see him as I rose to receive my husband's companion. Somebody else, however, saw him quicker than I did. In a moment Sara had dropped into the shadow of the

curtains, and became perfectly silent. An inconceivable kind of sympathy with her (it could be nothing but mesmerism) somehow cleared up the twilight in a moment, and made me aware who the stranger was. It was Domenico's master, Mr. Luigi, the Italian gentleman downstairs.

I cannot tell how the first preliminaries were got over. Of all times in the world to make acquaintance with anybody, think of the twilight, just before the candles came in, and when you could scarcely make out even the most familiar face! We got on somehow, however; we *three* — Sara sitting all the time dropt down, and nestling like a bird among the curtains, struck into the most unaccountable silence. I suppose she thought nobody saw her; whereas, on the contrary, Mr. Luigi, looking out of the darkness where he was sitting towards the window, saw the outline of her pretty head against a bit of green-blue sky as distinct as possible; and looked at it too, as I can testify.

When candles came at last (Mrs. Goldsworthy had a lamp; but it smoked, and the chimney broke, and all sorts of things happened to it), after the first dazzled moment we all looked at each other. Then Sara became clearly visible, and was forced out of her corner to let the blind be drawn down. She came forward to the light at once, with just the least bravado in her manner, ashamed of hiding herself. She had still the drawing in her hand.

"Mr. Langham," said Sara, "do you know this

wonderful drawing? I never was so amused and amazed in my life. Do you know it's the Park? and my godmamma Sarah when she was a young lady and a great beauty. To think you should find it accidentally! And it must have been one of her old lovers who did it. Oh, please give it to me, and let me show it her. She would be pleased. She would soon find out whose it was.

Here Mr. Luigi, who had taken up one of those old books of my father's, which Harry in his carelessness had left upon the table, uttered a very brief instantly suppressed exclamation. I wonder what *he* could have discovered! It was the copy of Racine, which I have before mentioned as among papa's books, on which was written the name of Sarah Mortimer. Sarah Mortimer! Here were we all strangers, or almost strangers, to each other, all apparently startled by the sound and sight of this name. What could the Italian have to do with Sarah Mortimer? she who broke poor papa's heart, and whom we had found out so suddenly to-day?

"This lady?" said Mr. Luigi, holding up the book to me with a slight tremulousness, "Madame will not think me impertinent; does she live?"

"Indeed," said I, with a shiver of agitation, "I cannot tell. I do not not know anything about her; her name on that book and the drawing is all we know. I think she is a ghost. Do you too know her name? Sara, tell us, for pity's sake, who is this Sarah Mortimer of the Park?"

Sara stared at the book with still greater amazement than she had shown at the drawing. "She is my godmamma," said the girl, in a disturbed, amazed tone. "She is Miss Mortimer of the Park. Since you all know her name, you all know that certainly. How is it you know her? why did you not tell me? Is there any mystery? it all seems very strange to me."

"Then it is that lady," exclaimed Mr. Luigi — "it is that lady I did meet in the village."

"No," said Sara, recovering herself in a moment; "you met my other godmamma, her sister. She told me she had met you. May I ask if you found the lady in Manchester? Godmamma was very much interested and anxious to know. Did you find her? have you heard where she is to be found?"

Mr. Luigi looked at the book once more; then closed it down firmly with his hand; then gazed a little anxiously in Sara's face. "Have I found the lady?" he repeated like an echo. "Mademoiselle, I do not know."

Then the Italian, as if with an instinctive motion, laid his other hand over the book, and clasped them both upon it as though to hold something fast. Then to my amazement and to Sara's — but to something more than amazement on Sara's part — something very much like pique and offence — he turned towards Harry and began to talk on indif-

ferent matters. I had noticed a half-weary, half-impatient sigh escape him as he laid his hands over that book; but he showed no other symptom of emotion. The next moment he was talking in very good English, slightly, very slightly, broken with now and then a foreign idiom, something about public affairs. I confess I felt disappointed as well as Sara. He had recognised that name; somehow it was familiar to him; and his enigmatical answer had naturally stimulated our curiosity. He left us behind him staring and wondering, when he suddenly glided from the brink of some revelation to those quiet remarks upon English politics. Harry, full of his share of the common excitement, did not enter into it with half so much heart as Mr. Luigi. Harry blundered and was awkward, his thoughts being elsewhere. Mr. Luigi was quite undisturbed and at his ease. Sara scarcely spoke again while he remained; she did all but turn her back upon him; she showed her pique quite clearly enough to catch the quick eye of the Italian. Altogether he did not stay very long, thinking us, I daresay, rather an uncomfortable party; and Harry, disappointed as I had expected, not to find me alone, and be able to hold a comfortable consultation, went downstairs with him to smoke a cigar.

"Now they are gone," cried Sara; "now the man in the iron mask has left us. I wonder if that is what one would call a romantic Italian? ah! I'd rather have fat Domenico. Now they're gone, do

tell me, once for all, what is godmamma Sarah to you?"

"Nothing in the world that I know of," said I, faltering a little; "we have only that drawing and her name in the old book."

"I know there is something between her and *him*," said Sara, returning, to my great dismay to the other books on the table; "she knows about him, or he knows about her, or something. You know she was a long time abroad. What funny old books! Was it among those you found the drawing? But, stop, here is another Mortimer — Richard A. Mortimer — who is he? Papa has been their agent for centuries, and I have known them all my life, but I never heard of a Richard Mortimer. Do tell me, who was he?"

"Indeed, it is all very odd," cried I, really fluttered out of my self-possession. "I wonder what will come of it? It is very strange and bewildering. Richard Mortimer was my father."

"Then you are a relation!" cried Sara; "you must be a relation, there are so few Mortimers; and your father must have been her lover. Are you sure, are you quite sure? Why, *your* name must be Mortimer too! and Milly! Mr. Langham calls you Milly — Milly Mortimer! Oh, dear, dear! I never can get to the Park to tell them to-night, and how shall I contain myself till to-morrow? I knew there must be something that made me love you so much at first sight. To be sure, that explains everything.

Milly Mortimer! oh, you dear, pretty, good, delightful Mrs. Langham! I am so glad, so happy! They are my godmothers, and so to be sure we are relations too."

Upon which Sara threw her arms round me in a wild, rapid embrace. I was so very much shaken and disturbed with all that had happened, that I could scarcely bear this last. I remember using all my remaining power to convince her that the relationship was by no means certain still, and that it was not to be communicated to the ladies at the Park without further assurance. Sara, however, only overpowered me with caresses and exclamations. She entirely upset all the remaining strength I had. She kept us from that consultation which Harry and I were both so much longing for. She left us at last in terror lest we should be brought into immediate contact with those unknown relatives. This day of great news, excitement, and perplexity, was, I think, the most exhausted, uncomfortable day I ever met with in all my life.

CHAPTER IX.

"It is the oddest business altogether that I had ever anything to do with," said Harry, next morning; "one cannot tell what step to take first. My own idea, of course, is to call on this old Cresswell and get it all out of him. He evidently is the man who knows."

"Ah, but, Harry, if he is one of those scheming lawyers," said I, "why should he go and betray his clients for people whom he never heard of before? and, besides, it would be impossible to tell him how we got information about it, for you could not speak of the advertisement without ruining poor Mr. Ward."

"Milly, I may be sorry enough for your poor Mr. Ward, but I am more interested a great deal in you and your rights," said Harry; "besides, if everything came true we could make it up to him. I see nothing for it but going to old Cresswell. He will be glad — since he did think of an advertisement — to have such a rod of terror to hold over the heads of his old ladies; at all events we shall know what it is. It might come to nothing after all," said Harry, with a little sigh, "and there is nothing more injurious than to be kept uncertain. Why, to tell the truth, I feel extravagant this morning: I got up

with the feeling. I should like to go and ruin myself in accordance with the sentiment of the moment. If it's all true, why should we be economical? — your grandfather's red brick house on one side, and this Park on the other. We're lucky people, Milly. I'll either go and see old Cresswell and have it out with him, or I'll go and throw away every shilling I have."

"Ah, Harry, give it to me," I said, holding out my hands; "but I don't believe you have any money, so it doesn't matter. Only — just wait a little, please; don't let us do things hastily. Think of thrusting our claims suddenly upon two old ladies who perhaps have enjoyed it all their life. Only think of us two, young and happy, disturbing the lives of two old people who are not so fortunate as we are! Not to-day; let us try to get other proof first. Try if Mr. Pendleton knows anything — write to Haworth again. At least, don't let us be hasty; a day or two cannot matter; and I don't trust this Mr. Cresswell," cried I, with some vehemence. "He cannot be honest, or he would not have done such a thing."

Harry laughed at my earnestness. He said lawyer-villains had gone out of fashion, and that there were no Mr. Gammons now-a-days. The truth is, we had both been reading novels since we came to Chester, and I am not at all sure that Harry was as sceptical about Mr. Gammon as he professed to be. But, to my consolation, he went out without

any definite purpose of beginning his proceedings. "I dare say old Cresswell is an old humbug," said Harry. "I'll see whether there is not some other old fellow about who is up to everybody's genealogy; surely there ought to be some such person about the Cathedral. And I'll write to Pendleton, Milly. To be sure, there is nothing to hurry us. 'Let us take time, that we may be done the sooner.' I'll do nothing desperate to-day."

When he was gone I felt a little sense of relief. I sat long in the same chair, with the table still littered with the breakfast things, neglecting my duties and even baby. He had been brought downstairs before Harry went out, and was now sitting at my feet on the carpet, playing with my work-basket, which much contented him. I did not observe the havoc that was taking place, but sat still in a tumult of thoughts which I could not describe. I suppose nobody ever did come to a sudden knowledge — or even fancy — that they might be found out heirs of a great estate without feeling fluttered. I was half afraid of the thought, yet it had a strange, vague, bewildering exhilaration in it. Sometimes a trembling shadow would cross my mind of my old spectre; but it had faded again to-day into the agitation of surprised and trembling hopes. One does not always feel the same even about one's own terrors. And, upon the whole, I felt raised into a kind of general elevation, thrust up above myself into another region, capable of being kinder, more liberal and magnanimous

than I had ever felt before. I suppose it must have been the same feeling which Harry had when he said he felt extravagant. I could have emptied my purse to a beggar, I believe, — at least I could have found it in my heart to give him sixpence instead of a penny, — to such an extent had this vague, exhilarating *rich* feeling carried me away.

Lizzie looked a little mysterious when I called her at last. She was bursting with something to tell; and when I addressed some ordinary question to her, her news broke forth suddenly without any introduction. "Eh, the gentleman's awa' again," cried Lizzie, "and he thinks she maun be found or heard tell o' — he thinks there *maun* be word of her. The gentleman's awa' back where he was, to bring something he left, and 'Menico says, as sure's death she maun be found."

"Who must be found?"

"Eh, mem, it's the leddy! They came a' this gate, ower the hills and the seas, to find a leddy. I canna just understand what she is," said Lizzie, "but she's some freend; and 'Menico's clear she maun be found now, and he's dancing like to bring down the house for joy."

"But you don't look very joyful, Lizzie; what is the matter?" said I.

Lizzie made a desperate effort to restrain herself, but, failing, burst into violent tears. "Eh, he's written me a letter!" cried the girl, sobbing; and then, with much fumbling, eyes blind with tears, and

a face all glowing with shame, the letter came forth from the bosom of Lizzie's dress, and was thrust into my hand.

Alas for my self-congratulations over Lizzie's childish age! Fourteen, after all, it appeared, was no safeguard. But I was as much amused as troubled when I undid Domenico's letter. It was written on odd thin paper, in a very tolerable hand; it was addressed to *the* Elizabeth Bain, and its contents were as follows:

"To the my little good Lessee.

"You be good child; if the lady yours will, I take you to the theatre after to-morrow, for gratitude. To me you show of bounty, I to you of thanks. There be grand sight at the theatre which will please to you. Show the Signora yours this letter mine, and ask if permission. It will much please to me to make festa for my little good Lessee. There be none word in English for festa, for because the English not know to make it.

"DOMENICO."

"But, Lizzie," cried I, in surprise, "there is nothing in this to cry about. He only means to be kind, poor fellow. There is not a word in all this that sounds like ——"

Love-making, I was about to have said, but paused, partly in respect for the innocence of the girl, and partly ashamed of myself for my instinctive suspicion that flirtation was inevitable when "a

foreigner," however fat, was in the case. Lizzy had wiped her eyes and was looking at me wistfully, quite ready to sob again.

"Oh, it's no him," cried Lizzie; "he's a papist, puir man, and he doesna ken ony better. But oh, mem, it's me — me that was weel brought up, and learned the catechism and aye gaed to the kirk; and what will I do? what will I do?"

"For pity's sake, Lizzie, tell me what is the matter?" cried I, really alarmed.

Lizzie burst into tears once more. She wiped her eyes with her apron, with hot and humid hands; then, casting a pathetic glance at me from under that drapery, sobbed forth the dreadful confession, "Oh, mem! though I think burning shame, and ken it's dreadful, I canna help it — I would like to gang!"

This anti-climax was too much for my gravity, and Lizzie looked on with moist, uncomprehending eyes at the burst of laughter which I could not restrain. Poor Lizzie! I have no doubt she thought me very heartless neither to satisfy her guilty desire after such vanities, nor her scruples of conscience and violent shame at her own weakness. Baby, however, was more sympathetic. Seeing his beloved Lizzie in tears, a fellow-feeling made him scream in concert. *He* had to be consoled, though his nurse went away wistful, trembling lest I should consent, and lest I should not consent. But privately I confess I was very much relieved and not a little ashamed of myself.

To think I should have suspected any absurd love-making between these two! I felt ready to go and ask poor Lizzie's pardon. But why should not she go to the theatre and satisfy her mind? Domenico could not be less than twenty years older than herself. On the whole, this little episode quite increased the lightness of my spirits. The day was bright, the spring was every hour becoming more sweet, and as I sat there by myself with my child in the little back-room, noting the sunshine, which did not reach us, fall sweet upon the little walled-in gardens at the back, a sudden project which had already glanced through my mind, became feasible on the moment. Yes, I should do it. Lizzie and baby, for a breath of country air, should go with me. By actual witness of my own eyes I would identify the Park.

CHAPTER X.

THE next day Harry had duties of one sort and another, which would completely occupy his time. He had not found any student of genealogy who could tell him all about the Mortimers of the Park; but he had heard of one, and, between that and his duty, was full engaged both in person and thoughts. A better opportunity could not be. I told him I thought of taking a long walk into the country with Lizzie and baby this beautiful day; and, except a warning not to go too far and weary myself, Harry had nothing to say against my intention. I may say, however, that in the mean time, having consulted with him on the subject, I had plunged Lizzie's mind into the most dread commotion of terror, delight, and curiosity, by consenting to Domenico's proposal, only adding Mrs. Goldsworthy to the party, to make all right.

And it was true that Mr. Luigi had disappeared again; he was only to be three days gone, Domenico assured us, holding up three of his fingers. "Tree sola, tree only," repeated the fat fellow once more, blocking up the passage as of old; and once more, with that inimitable wheel and elastic step of his, opening the door before any one could approach it. I could not help wondering to myself whether the

Italian gentleman was likely to leave Chester before we did; certainly the loss of Domenico would make quite a difference in the house. I had not thought quite so much as I might have been supposed to have done about this Italian gentleman. He too had recognised the name of Sarah Mortimer as having some influence on his fate. He had left early next morning, as if acting upon the knowledge he had gained, whatever that might be. It was very strange; afterwards, of course, I came to lay everything together, and wonder at myself that I had not seen how things were tending. But at the moment I was full of my own thoughts; they seemed so very much more important to me just then than anything else. I dismissed Mr. Luigi with just half a thought of surprise and curiosity; I dare say Sara Cresswell had thought more of him. And Sara had not come to me through all that long intervening day. Could she have gone to the Park to tell her news? would they acknowledge or pretend to disown us? That was a question far more interesting to me than all the Italians in the world.

The private object of my expedition, however, was one I was truly ashamed to mention to anybody; but, for all that, it had taken a great hold upon myself. I have said I had been reading novels; and the very last one we had from the library was "Ten Thousand a Year." It struck upon my mind even at the very moment when poor Mr. Ward had told me first. Those dear, good, delightful, fine, super-

fine Aubreys! to think of all their sufferings, the poor dear superlative people — how dreadful they felt it to have only a *maid* waiting at table! Oh me! and only to think that here might we ourselves be bringing about such another calamity! Of course you may think it was very fantastical. I do confess that the dreadful downfall of having only a *maid* to wait, seemed to me, at first sight, the very most *fine* distress I had ever heard of; but it took a hold upon my mind all the same; I could not help imagining to myself the other side of the picture. It was very pleasant to think of falling heirs to a great estate, and being lifted in a moment from poverty into great wealth; but who were those two pathetic figures turning away from the closed door of the house which had been their home so long, mournfully settling down in their new straitened quarters, breaking up all the habits of their lives, missing somehow in an unspoken way, that it would be ludicrous to express in words, but was far from ludicrous to feel, all the grander circumstances of their life? A! that was quite a different question. I thought I could see them sighing over their contracted rooms, their fallen state — not speaking, falling silent rather, life going out and ebbing away from them. I saw the two pale old lofty faces, the pride, the submission, the deep sense of downfall concealed in their hearts, and I felt myself stopped short in my way. Those ineffable Aubreys, those figures painted on velvet, those dear porcelain crea-

tures, with their exquisite troubles, had an effect upon my imagination, even though I might venture to smile at them sometimes. Superfine people, to be sure, must have superfine afflictions; and to think of being a Tittlebat Titmouse, and driving out such angels from their paradise into the cold-hearted, unsympathetic world, that cared no more whether they had a six-foot footman and a carriage, than it cared about myself, a subaltern's poor wife, driving out of Chester in an omnibus! So this was the real cause of my journey. I went remorsefully, thinking all the way how Mrs. Aubrey swooned at all emergencies. I wonder, when they heard the dreadful power we had over them, would Miss Sarah and Miss Milly swoon in each other's arms? I could see them going about, stricken silent, afraid to look at each other; and it would be all *our* doing. Remorseful to my very heart, I went to visit their village and ask about them, and see the house if I could. Perhaps some arrangement might be made, after all, to prevent any loss to these poor dear old ladies. I felt as if I could have done anything for them, my heart was so compunctious and repentant of the power we had to do them harm. I am not sure my great magnanimousness did not have a root in what Harry called *feeling extravagant*, as well as in "Ten Thousand a Year."

We went out a considerable part of the way in the omnibus, and then walked. After a good long walk through a nice country, we saw a pretty com-

mon a little way before us: I call it pretty because some parts of it were very unequal and broken, having gorse bushes, with here and there a golden honey-bud among the prickles. To get to the common, we crossed over a very clean, nicely kept piece of road, straight and smooth, leading down to the village from the gates of a great house. The house was too far off to make it out, but I felt my heart beat a little, knowing, from the description I had got, that it could be no other than the Park.

I left Lizzie and her charge seated on the soft grass of the common, where baby, who had never before known anything so delightful, began to pluck at the crowflowers with his fat hands; and went down into the village to buy them some biscuits. I confess I felt very guilty. Going anywhere all by myself confused me, not being accustomed to it; but I was not an innocent stranger here; I was a spy in my rival's kingdom; I was a Bolingbroke pretending to acknowlédge the sway of the existing sovereign: I was going to traffic with his subjects and tamper with them. If the village authorities had found me out, and held a court-martial and hanged me on the spot, I think I should have acknowledged the justice of their decision. I was a spy.

It was a nice village — a nice, well cared-for, tidy, yet not too picturesque or unnatural village; looking as if the richer people about were friendly and sensible, not interfering too much, but keeping up a due reverence and influence. Some tall bushes

of broom were actually bursting into yellow streaks over the garden palings — not wall — of a house standing back a little, which I found out to be the Rectory. It must have been very sheltered and warm, for it was still only April. However, though I was full of curiosity, my mind was not sufficiently disengaged to carry away a clear picture of the village; and when the women looked out from the doors at me with an instinct that a stranger was passing, I felt more guilty than ever. I made my way accordingly to the baker's as fast as I could, and got some great dark-complexioned ponderous buns there, which I felt sure would rouse Lizzie's national sense of superiority to great triumph. Then I made a tremulous excuse of wanting some biscuits besides, and so got a little time to bring forward the questions I had prepared.

"Who is it that lives in the great house at the other end of the village?" said I hypocritically, pointing with my finger towards the Park.

"Who is it?" said the baker's wife, leaning on her counter with a certain contempt and admiration of my ignorance; "law bless you, ma'm, you don't know this place, seemingly. Them's the Miss Mortimers, the oldest family in Cheshire. They're as well known as the Queen about here."

"I am a stranger," said I hurriedly. "Are they ladies — I mean are they young ladies? were there no sons?"

The baker's wife leaned back upon a sack of

flour, and laughed. "Miss Milly's godmoother to half the village," she said; "she's none that young, she's isn't. No, there wasn't no son. I've heard my mother say there was once talk of making Miss Mortimer an ouldest son like, but it couldn't be done. They're cooheiresses, that's what it's ca'ed — I've seen it written down myself — cooheiresses of the late Lewis Esquire; that's the name it goes by; and as they ain't married it's no harm."

"Did they succeed their father, then?" said I.

"And that they did," cried the woman, "and their father's father, and grandfather, and great-grandfather, as far back as I don't know when; they're no mushroom folks, the folks in the Park."

I felt very much puzzled and perplexed; how could my father, then, have anything to do with it? It was very strange.

"But I suppose the lands were entailed, then, or something of that sort. Was there never another heir that claimed? I think you must be wrong," said I, betraying myself in my wonder and haste.

The baker's wife opened her eyes wide and stared; then laughed out rather scornfully — politeness is not the first rule either of life or speech in Cheshire.

"I've lived here in the village all my life," she said; "if I don't know, I'd like to hear who should. Nay, nay, there never was a dream of another heir; they're surer nor most folks are the Miss Mortimers. There ain't scarce one living belonging to them to

get it when they're gone. I tell you what it is, it's a mistake. You're thinking on Eden Hall."

"Oh!" said I, "perhaps! I am a stranger here."

"Sure you're strange," said the baker's wife; "any one in the village could tell that. Ne'er a one asked such questions o' me — nor any questions at all, but the price of bread, and how the crops are to be, except that Frenchman with the moustache. You're not belonging to him, are you? You're English by your speech."

"Oh yes, I'm English," cried I, not without a vague momentary vision of the village court-martial, and being hung up for a spy. "I will take my change, please."

And I took my change, and went away with quickened steps but changed feelings. I had not the heart to speak to anybody else. I passed old women at their doors, who, no doubt, could have told something about it; but I did not venture to make any more inquiries. I was completely lost in perplexity. The undisputed representatives of a race, the heirs of father, grandfather, and great-grandfather to unknown antiquity — what could be urged against their possession? I was startled into sudden doubt of the whole matter. What if it were all a deception? The very pathway swam and twisted under my eyes. When I reached the common, and threw myself wearily on the grass beside little Harry and his maid, I felt quite a different person from her who had left them there. I gave Lizzie the

coarse buns, but I did not listen to the comments which came as I knew they would. I was far too much bewildered and shaken out of my fancies to be amused. After I had rested awhile, I got up, and, taking them with me, went up, rather faltering, to the gates of the Park. A little lodge, half hidden among evergreen bushes, was at the gate. I went forward, Lizzie following me close, to ask if we might be permitted to look at the house.

But, just as I was going up to the door, I was accosted by a lady who came hurriedly forward by a side-path. She held out her hand to stop us before she came up, and full of fanciful alarm as I was, I stopped, startled, with again the sensation of having been found out. She was middle-sized and stout, with a plump, handsome figure, and sensible, kind face — very sensible, very kind, not brilliant at all; and, I think, with as much perplexed thought and anxiety upon it, as there was on mine.

"Don't go into the lodge with the baby, please," she cried, as soon as she was near; "the little girl has the hooping-cough. It's always best to keep out of the way of danger. If I can tell you what you want, shall be very glad. I see you're a stranger; or if you want to see Mrs. Williams, send away the baby, please. Hooping-cough's very catching, and it's hard upon such a young child."

This voice and this speech completely overpowered me. I could not doubt for a moment that this was one of the Miss Mortimers. I was no

longer a mere spy; I was an unnatural traitor. I motioned Lizzie with my hand to go away, but stood still speechless myself, the tears rising to my eyes. The lady stood waiting to see what I wanted, but discovering my distress, as some people can, came a little closer to me. "Are you ill? can I help you in anything?" she said, looking very pitifully and kindly into my wet eyes.

"No, thank you. I was going to ask if I might look at the Park; but I must make haste after baby," I cried. I had the impulse to curtsey to her as children do; for anything I know I did it. The only thing I am certain of is, that as fast as my feet would carry me, I hastened away.

CHAPTER XI.

We were able to get the same omnibus going home, which I was very glad of, for the strange defeat I had received made me feel doubly weary with the walk, which, after all, had not been a very long one. There was only one person in this omnibus, which was not a town omnibus, you know, but one which went between Chester and an important village, seven or eight miles off. He was an elderly man, very well dressed in black, with a white cravat. To tell the plain truth, I took him for a dissenting preacher by his dress; and as he looked very serious and respectable, and was very polite in helping us to get in, we had some little conversation after a while. When he saw me look at the houses we passed with an appearance of interest, he told me the names of them, or who they belonged to. He was exceedingly polite and deferential, so polite that he called me ma'am, which sounded odd; but I could only suppose he was an old-fashioned person and liked such antiquated ways of expression. I confess a suspicion of his real condition never crossed my mind. But he evidently knew everybody, and after a while my prevailing idea woke up again.

"Do you know," said I, with a little hesitation,

"the family at the Park — the Miss Mortimers? I should very much like to hear something about them."

"There's nobody I know better, ma'am," said our companion, with a slight look of surprise; "I've been with — that is, I've known 'em this fifty years."

"Oh, then will you please tell me how they succeeded?" said I; "how did they come into the estate?"

"How they succeeded?" said the stranger, with a certain slow wonder and amazement; "why, ma'am, in the natural way, after their father as was Squire before them."

Here I could not help thinking to myself that the dissenting clergy must be dreadfully uneducated, if this were one of them.

"But was there never any gap in the succession?" said I; "has it been in a straight line? has there been no break lately — no branch of the family passed over?"

"Bless you, ma'am, you don't know the Mortimers," said our friend; "there's never enough of them to make branches of the family. There was a second cousin the young ladies had a many years ago, but I never heard of no more of them, and he was distant like, and had no more thoughts of succession than I had. If that gen'lman was alive or had a family, things might be different now."

"How do you mean things might be different now?" cried I.

"The ladies, ma'am, has never married," said the man, who certainly could not be more than a Methodist local preacher at the utmost, "and, in the course of nature, there can't be no natural heir."

This view of the subject, however, was one totally unsatisfactory to me. "Are you sure," said I, "that there never was any other heir spoken of — that there never was any story about the succession — that there was never anybody to dispute it with the Miss Mortimers? I thought I had heard some such story about —"

"Ah, you're thinking, ma'am, of Eden Hall, just the next property," said he.

"But was there never any claimant to the Park?" asked I, somewhat excited.

"No such thing," said the man in black, "nor couldn't be. Bless you, the family's well known. There never was so much as a will-case, as I ever heard on; for why, you see, ma'am, there never was such a plenty of children to make quarrels. When there's but two or so, there's little can come of quarrelling. No, no! there never was no strange claimant to our estate."

"To *your* estate, did you say?" cried I in amazement.

"No, ma'am, no — no such presumption. I said *our*, and sure I might; I've been with the ladies this fifty year."

"Oh!" I exclaimed, much dismayed. This was certainly coming to the very head-quarters for information. This was no local preacher after all, but only the Miss Mortimers' major-domo. If there had been any possible excuse for it, I should certainly have got out of the omnibus immediately, so utterly confounded and taken aback did I feel. But as we were still some two miles out of Chester, and we were all tired, and baby cross and sleepy, I had to think better of it. However, in my consternation I fell into instant silence, and felt really afraid of meeting the man's eye. He sat opposite me, beside Lizzie, very respectful and quiet, and by no means obtruding himself upon my notice. I cannot tell how shocked and affronted and angry I felt with myself. I had, I suppose, like most people of my condition, a sort of horror of men-servants, a sort of resentful humiliation in feeling that I had mistaken one of that class for an ordinary fellow-traveller, a frightened idea of what Harry would think to hear of his wife sitting in an omnibus beside Miss Mortimer's man. Altogether I was sadly discomfited and beaten. The Miss Mortimers had got the better of me at every hand; and I was entirely humiliated and cast down by this last blow of all.

The interval was quite tedious and oppressive till we arrived in Chester. Seeing me look at another house unconsciously as we passed, the man, most kindly and good-humouredly, I am sure, after my sudden withdrawal from the conversation, men-

tioned its name. "That is Dee-sands, ma'am, the mayor o' Chester's place. It ain't within sight of the Dee, and there's none of them sands near here, but they do say it's named after a song," said the good-natured cicerone. "Oh!" said I again, shrinking back into my corner. He looked at me rather closely after this, muttering something that sounded like "No offence!" and leaned back also, a little affronted. It did not occur to me that I was only drawing his attention to what I had said before by this sudden reserve. I took care to show no more interest in the wayside villas, and sprang out with a great sense of relief when we reached the end of our journey. Happening to glance back when I had reached our own door, I saw that the omnibus had been delayed by numerous descents from the roof, and was still standing where we had left it, and that Miss Mortimer's man had put his head out of one of the windows, and was watching where I went to. This circumstance made me enter with great haste and trepidation. Now, above all, I had been found out; and if ever any one felt like a traitor and a spy, it was surely me, stumbling back from that unsuccessfull enterprise across the threshold of Mrs. Goldsworthy's house.

The door was opened to us too alertly to be done by anybody but Domenico; and it was Domenico accordingly, in his vast expanse of shirt sleeves. It was quite a comfort to see his beaming, unconscious face. "The time is fine," said Domenico; "it pleases

to the signora to make promenade? Ah, bravo! the piccolo signore grow like tree."

This was in reference to baby, who crowed at him and held out his arms, and whom Domenico freely called piccolo and piccolino, at first somewhat to my indignation; but I confess the good fellow's voice and looks, and the way baby stretched out to him, out of poor Lizzie's tired arms, was quite consolatory and refreshing to me. It is easy to get a feeling of home to a place, surely. It was only lodgings, and Domenico was a foreigner, and I had not the ghost of an early association with the little insignificant house; but I cannot tell you what a sense of ease and protection came upon me the very moment I was within the door.

Upstairs on the table lay a letter. We got so few letters that I was surprised, and took it up immediately, and with still greater surprise found it to be from Sara Cresswell, lamenting over not having found me, wondering where I could have gone, and concluding with a solemn invitation to dinner in her father's name. "Papa is so anxious to see Mr. Langham and you," wrote Sara, "and to talk over things. I have been obliged to obey him for once, and not to go or write out to dear godmamma till he has seen you. If you don't come he will be so dreadfully disappointed; indeed, I am quite sure if you don't come *he will go to see you.* I can't suppose you will be able to resist such a threat as that.

Send me a word, please, directly. I shall be quite wretched till I know."

This revived all my excitement, as may be supposed; there *must* be something in it after all, and surely, instead of Harry going to his office to seek him, it would be much better to meet at his house, and with an evening's leisure too; for Sara had taken care to add that nobody else was to be there. The earnestness of this invitation seemed so entirely contradictory to all that I had heard to-day, that the wildest vague suspicions of mystery began to break upon my mind. To be sure, bakers and butlers were not likely to be in the secret. Mr. Cresswell knew all about it; and here was he seeking us entirely of his own accord! Once more all my dazzled ambitious dreams came back again; I forgot my failure and sense of treachery — I was no traitor — it was only my rights that I had been thinking of; and they were not pathetic possible victims, but triumphant usurpers, who now had possession of the Park.

CHAPTER XII.

I HAD managed to regain my spirits entirely before Harry returned: if anything, indeed, I think this revival of all my fancies, after my disappointment and annoyance, had stimulated me more than before. It was a beautiful April evening, quite warm and summer-like, and there had just been such a sunset, visible out of the front windows, as would have gone far at any time to reconcile me to things in general. I was sitting in the little drawing-room alone, with baby Harry in my lap, much delighted to find that he could stand by my side for half a minute all by himself, and rewarding him with kisses for the exhibition of that accomplishment. I was tired after my long walk, and felt it delicious rest to lean back in that chair and watch the light gradually fading out of the sky, free to think my own thoughts, yet always with the sweet accompaniment of baby's inarticulate little syllables, and touches of his soft small fingers. I remember that moment like a moment detached out of my life. My heart had rebounded higher out of its despondency. Who could tell what a bright future that might be on the very brink of which we trembled? And I, whom Harry had married so foolishly, it was I who was to bring this wealth to

my husband and my child. It was pleasant thinking in that stir of hope, in that calm of evening, sitting listening for Harry's step on the stair. The light grew less and less in the two front window's, and the open door of communication between the two rooms brought in a long line of grey luminous sky from the east into my twilight picture. And I had so much to tell Harry. Ah, there at last was his foot upon the stair!

He came in, not to the room in which I was, but to the other, and gave a glance round it to see if I was there; then, not seeing me, instead of calling out for "Milly darling," as he always did, Harry threw his cap on the table, and dropped heavily into a chair, with a long sigh — a strange sigh, half relieved, half impatient — the sigh of something on his mind. I can see the half-open door, the long gleam of the eastern window, the scarcely visible figure dropped into that chair — I can see them all as clearly as at that moment. I stumbled up unawares, gathered baby into my arms I cannot tell how, and was at his side in a moment. My own voice sounded foreign to my ears as I cried out, "Harry, what is it? tell me!" Nothing else would come from my lips.

He rose too — the attitude of rest was not possible at such a time; he came and held the child and me close to him, making me lean on him. "It is nothing more than we expected," he said, "Milly

darling. It is only to have a heart — you are a soldier's wife."

I knew without any more words. I stood within his arm, silent, desperate, holding my dear frightened baby tight, too tight. Ah, God help us! In a moment, in the twinkling of an eye, as the Bible says, out of the happiest flutter of hope into that cold, desperate, hopeless darkness. I could have fancied I was standing on a battlefield, with the cold, cold wind blowing over us. I made no outcry or appeal; my heart only leaped with a start of agony at the worst, at the last conclusion. We were not within his sheltering arm — he young, and strong, and safe — but looking for him — looking for him on that black, dead battlefield!

I don't think it was the cry of the child, whom he took softly out of my straining arms, but Harry's compassion that roused me. I cried out sharply, "Don't pity me, Harry; I'll bear it." It was all I could say. I went out of his arm with agitated, hurried step, and shut out that cruel clear sky looking down upon the battlefield I saw. I did not think nor notice that this unseasonable action threw us into perfect darkness. It was a kind of physical relief to me to do something with my hands, to ring some common sound into my ears. At this moment Lizzie came into the room, carrying lights. As I lifted my confused eyes to them, what a ghastly change had passed on this room — all so cold, dark, miserable; the furniture thrust about out of its place; the

fireplace dark, and Harry standing there, with the child in his arms and his cap thrown on the table, as if this very moment he was going away. He was in uniform too, and the light caught in the glitter of his sword. Was there to be no interval? My head swam round. My heart seemed to stop beating. The misery of imagination drove me half frantic — as if the present real misery had not been enough.

After a while we sat together once more as usual, he trying to bring me to talk about it and receive it like a common event. "It is what we have looked forward to for months," said Harry; "it should not be strange to you now. Think how you looked for it, Milly darling, long ago."

"Yes," said I. Was it likely I could talk? I only rocked myself backward and forward in my chair.

"You said God would give you strength when the hour came: the hour has come, Milly. You are a soldier's wife!" he said.

"Yes, yes!" and then I burst into an attempt to tell him what I had been doing — if I must talk let me talk of something else than this — and broke down, and fell, God help me! to crying and sobbing like a child; which was how the good Lord gave me the power of bearing what He had sent. I got better after that; I heard and listened to it all, every detail, when they would have to go, where they would sail from, — everything. And then I grew to see by degrees that Harry, but for me, was not

sorry to be sent to the war; that his eye was brightening, his head raised erect. Oh me! he was a soldier; and I — I was only a foolish creature that could not follow him or be with him, that could not come between him and those bullets, that could only stay at home and pray.

But when he came and stroked my hair down with his hand, and soothed me like a child, and bent over me with such compassion in his face — sorry for me, full of pity in his affectionate tender heart for the poor girl he was leaving behind — that was more than I could bear. With a dreadful pang I thought it was his widow he saw, all lonely and desolate, with no one to comfort her; and I, his wife, thrust him away, and defied that dreadful killing thought. No! *I* might leap at the worst, because I could not help my hurrying, blind imagination; but he should not, no one else should — I was resolute of that. So we talked of all the things that were needful for his preparation; and he spoke of expense and economy, and I laughed and scorned his talk. Economy! expense! Perhaps I did not know, could not think where it was to come from; but where careless money can get everything, do you think careful love would fall far short? I took courage to laugh at his words.

And then I told him all my day's trials, and that invitation for the next day, which, even after what had happened, we must still accept. We did not have baby downstairs again that night — I

dared not — courage will go so far, but not further. I went upstairs to put him into his little bed, and was glad, God help me! to be out of Harry's sight for half an hour. But still I was not free; Lizzie was about me, gliding here and there with her inquisitive sharp eyes — sharp eyes all the sharper for tears, praying and threatening me with her looks. Nobody would believe in my courage. They thought I should break down and die. Oh me! if one could die when one pleased, one might sometimes make short work of it; God does not give us that coward's refuge. When I was all alone in my own room, I took an old regimental sash of Harry's and bound it round me tight. I cannot tell why I did it; I think it was in my fancy somehow to bind up my heart, that it should neither yield nor fail.

PART V.

THE LADIES AT THE HALL.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER I.

The Ladies at the Hall.

Some weeks of quietness passed over us after these dreadful half-revelations which really disclosed nothing. I will not attempt to give you any explanation of my state of mind; I don't think I could if I tried. I had ceased to think of insanity in respect to my sister Sarah; she was not insane — no such thing. That scrap of conversation I had overheard in her dressing-room overturned all my delusions. Some real thing, some real person, had power to drive her half mad with anxiety and fear. What she could be anxious about — what she could be afraid of — she who had lived in the deadest peace at home for nearly five-and-twenty years — was to me an inscrutable mystery. But that this Italian stranger was no stranger — that his name was given him after the name of my father — that love, supposed by Carson to be love in the heart, and admitted by Sarah to be love for the estate, had suggested that name — were facts not to be doubted. I need not say anything about the long trains of agitated and confused thinking into which these discoveries betrayed me. They ended in nothing — they could not end in anything. But for a kind of determination I had, to

keep up steadfastly till some light came, and see the end of it, I don't doubt they would have made me ill. But I kept well in spite of them. Either our bodies are not so sensitive as they are said to be, or I am a very stupid person, which I wouldn't deny if I was taxed with it; for certainly many things that worry other people don't trouble me very much. However, let the reason be what it might, I kept up. I could not take any comfort, as Sarah did, in knowing this young man had gone away. I can't tell how she could have blinded herself, poor soul. *I* knew he would come back. She did not seem to think so; yet surely she knew all about it far better than I did. What a strange blank, unexplainable mystery it was! Judging by appearances, the young man could not be much more than born when she returned home. Yet *she knew him.* Incomprehensible, wild, mad idea, of which, even after all I had heard, my reason denied the possibility! *She knew him!* and what or who, except herself, could explain it?

The only conclusion I could come to in all my pondering was one that had glanced into my mind before, that my father had married abroad and had a son, whom Sarah had somehow stormed or threatened him into disowning. But then my father was — I grieve to say it, but one must tell the truth — a man who considered his own will and pleasure much more than anything else in the world; and I don't think it would have broken his heart to

have turned us out of our heiress-honours, especially when we grew old and did not marry. And to have left a male heir behind him! It was a very unlikely story, to be sure; but certainly Sarah and he were never friends after their return. They avoided each other, though they lived under the same roof. They treated each other with a kind of ceremonious politeness, more like mutual dislike than love. Dear, dear, to think in a quiet English family how such a dark secret could rise and grow! I set to hunting up all my father's letters, not those he had written to me at home, for he never wrote except when he was obliged, but his own letters which he had left behind him. I could find nothing there that threw the slightest light upon the mystery. And then, if he was my father's son, what could the young Italian mean by seeking after this fabulous lady? What had the Countess *Sermoneta* to do with it? On the whole, anybody will see that I ended my investigations and reasonings just where I began them. I knew nothing about it — I could discover nothing. I had only to wait for the storm that was returning — that must return. And if — oh, dear, to think of such a thing! — if it was the miserable wealth we had, that prompted Sarah to set her face against this stranger — if it were to keep possession of the estate from him who was its lawful owner, then, thank Heaven! we were coheiresses. She thought she could do as she pleased with the Park, and I dare say, in right and lawful things, I might

have yielded to her; but I hope Millicent Mortimer was never the woman to keep what did not belong to her. If he had a title to the estate — Heaven knows how he could — I gave up trying to imagine; — but if he had, without either resistance or struggle he should have my share.

I really could not tell how much time had passed from that day when Sara Cresswell left us. It was near the end of April, so I suppose it must have been about two months after, when the accident I am going to tell happened. One afternoon when I was in the shrubbery I saw a young lady coming up towards the gate, a young creature, pretty and fair-complexioned, not tall, but very compact and orderly in her looks, with the air of being a handy, cheerful little woman, and good for most things she required to do. That was how she struck me, at all events. I dare say many people would have said she was just a very pretty girl, evidently sobered down by an early marriage, for she had an odd nursemaid by her side, carrying a beautiful baby. This stranger caught her attention very much as I watched her through the tall evergreen bushes. There was no mystery about *her*, certainly. I took a liking for her all of a sudden. Somehow it flashed into my mind that if I had ever been as young and as happy I might have been just such a young woman myself. I don't mean so pretty, but the same kind of creature. She was not rich, it was clear, for the nursemaid was not much

more than a child, an odd, awkward-looking girl; and though the young mother herself was sufficiently well dressed, her things had that indescribable home-made look which one always recognises. She was a little heated with walking, and had some very grave wrinkles of care, thoughtfulness, and even anxiety, upon her pretty smooth forehead. I saw her aiming straight at the door of the lodge, and hastened out to warn her off. She was certainly a stranger, and could never know that the hooping-cough was in the house. She took my warning very oddly, looked at me with great curiosity and with tears — I am sure I saw them coming into her eyes — and then, with some half-explanation about wishing to see the Park, hurried away after her lovely little boy. I don't know how long I stood, like a fool, looking after them, with a great desire to call her back and ask her in to see the house. Very likely she had come out from Chester to give her baby a country walk. Pretty young soul! I had no more doubt she was a good little wife than that she was a pretty creature, and very young to be that child's mother. I dare say she was tired and would have been much the better for a rest. But while I stood thinking of it, of course she was gone far out of the range of my voice. As for running after her, that was out of the question at my age; and perhaps, after all, it was as well not to bring that lovely baby near the lodge. Mary might have rushed out, and the mischief might have

been done in a moment. As for hooping-cough itself, when children have good constitutions, I can't say it is a thing I am very timid about; but it goes very hard with infants, and one could never excuse one'sself for putting such a child in peril. So I went back to the house, though rather slowly. I can't tell how it was, I am sure, — but I felt just as if I had missed a visit from a friend whom it would have been a great comfort to see.

I might have forgotten this little incident altogether, but for something that happened afterwards. Ellis had to go into Chester that day — indeed, he had just left a few minutes before my pretty young stranger came up. When Ellis came back he took an opportunity of speaking privately to me — indeed, he asked me to step aside into the hall for a minute. How he had found out that there was any uneasiness in my mind, or that any doubt about our right to the estate had ever occurred to me, I cannot tell; there are few things more wonderful than the kind of instinct by which servants divine the storms that may be only brooding about a house. Ellis looked very grave and important; but as he always does so, I was noways alarmed.

"There was a young lady, ma'am," said Ellis, "rode in the omnibus along with me this afternoon; well, not perhaps what you might call a *real* lady neither; leastways I don't know — her looks was all in her favour; but ladies, as you know, ma'am, don't go riding in an omnibus with bits of nurse-

girls and babies. But I don't say she was one of your common sort."

"Why, it must have been that pretty young creature," said I.

"Well, ma'am," said Ellis, actually with a little shamefacedness, "if you ask me my opinion, she was a pooty young creature, and so was the baby. But it ain't what she looked, Miss Milly; it's what she said. She asked as anxious as could be after the family at the Park."

"Did she know anything of us?" said I, quite delighted. "I wonder who she is; she quite took my heart."

"Not if you'd have heard her speak, ma'am," said Ellis. "She asked, kind of curious like, how you came to succeed to the estate, and whether there wasn't no gap in the line, and if none o' the family were ever passed over, and a deal of such questions. I told her it was Eden Hall she was thinking on, but she wasn't satisfied. She said wasn't there another claimant to the estate, and was I quite sure you was the right people and hadn't passed over nobody? But the strangest thing of all was, as soon as I let out by accident I belonged to the Park, it was all over in a twinkling. Afore you could know where you was, from asking her questions and looking as anxious as you please, and her little veil up over her bonnet, and her face turned to you like a child — in a moment, ma'am, it was dead shut up and draw back, and the veil down and

the face as if it didn't see the place you was. I said to myself 'There's summut in this,' as soon as ever I seed the way she took me belonging to the Park; and, to be sure, all the way not another word. Seeing things like that, I made bold to take a look after her when she went out; and if you might chance to have any curiosity, Miss Milly, here's a note of the address."

"But what should I have any curiosity about?" said I, agitated and surprised, taking the paper from him eagerly enough, yet quite at a loss to account for any interest I could have in his adventure. Ah! had it happened six months ago, how I should have laughed at Ellis! but it could not have happened six months ago. Ellis himself would have taken no notice whatever of such questions then.

"Ma'am," said Ellis, "the quality has their own ways; if *I* don't know that, who should? I dare to say it ain't nothink to you; but it's curious to have parties asking about the Park, as if we was a family as had romances; and being a pooty young creature, you see, Miss Milly, I thought it might be possible as you'd like to know."

"Very well, thank you, Ellis. I know you're always careful about the interests of the family," said I.

"I've been at the Park fifty year," said Ellis, with his best butler's bow. I gave him a nod, and went away to the library a great deal more disturbed than I would let him perceive, but I don't under-

take to say that he didn't see it all the same. Here was just the very fuel to set my smouldering impatience into a blaze. A sudden impulse of doing something seized upon me like a kind of inspiration. Here was a new actor in the strange bewildering drama. Who was she? Could she be Luigi's wife coming to aid him? As the thought struck me I trembled with impatience, standing at the window where it was too dark to read that address. I must wait for the morning, but certainly here was light out of darkness. However foolish it might be, I could bear it no longer. Here was a clue to guide my steps, and, whether right or wrong, to-morrow I should plunge into the mystery. The idea took possession of me beyond all power of resistance. I walked about the library in the dark, quite excited and tremulous. The wind had risen, and the night was rather stormy, but I could not go into the comfort and light of that great drawing-room where Sarah sat knitting. To-morrow, perhaps, I should know the secret of her death in life.

CHAPTER II.

I GOT very little rest that night, and was up almost by break of day the next morning. In the height of my excitement and anxiety, I felt more comfort in my mind than I had done for a long time. Sitting waiting is dreadful work, but I felt myself again when there appeared anything to do. I would not allow myself to suppose that it could end in nothing. Such inquiries could not possibly be made without a motive. I was so restless that I scarcely could remain quietly at home for the hour or two after breakfast which, out of regard for appearances, I was obliged to sacrifice; but for the same reason I made up my mind not to take the carriage, but to walk to the point where the omnibus passed, and take my chance of finding a seat in it as other people did. I went out accordingly about eleven o'clock, and left a message for Sarah that I was going to make some calls, and that she was not to wait dinner for me, as *I* should probably lunch somewhere at a friend's house. I saw Ellis look out after me from the hall window, with a kind of solemn grin on his face. Ellis was not to be de-ceived; he knew where I was going as well as I did myself.

As I had intended, I got into the omnibus when

it passed, to the great amazement and dismay of both guard and driver, who knew me well enough. I thought to myself, after I was in it, that it was perhaps rather a foolish thing to do. If any talk got abroad about our family, and if the strangers, male and female, kept making strange inquiries, and I was seen driving — no, that is not the word — *riding* in an omnibus, what would people think but that some extraordinary downfall had happened at the Park? There were only some countrywomen in the coach, who stared at me a little, but were too busy with their own affairs to mind my presence much. Fortunately there was no one there from our own village. It was a very long drive to Chester, going in the omnibus; and being unaccustomed to it, and never on the outlook for jolts, I felt it a good deal, I confess, besides being just the least thing in the world in a false position. Not that I minded being seen in the omnibus, but because the guard knew me, and was troublesomely respectful, and directed the observation of the other passengers towards me. Great people, when they pretend to travel *incognito*, must find it a great bore, I should fancy. Of course somebody always betrays them, and it must be a great deal easier to bear what you can't help bearing when there is no mystery about it, than when every blockhead thinks himself in your secret, and bound to keep up the joke with you.

At last we came to the street, and I got down.

It was near the railway station, and so all sorts of traffic poured past the place; shabby hackney cabs, omnibuses from the Chester hotels, vans of goods, all the miscellaneous stuff that pours into railway stations. The houses were a little back from the road, to be sure, with little "front gardens," as the people call them. I walked past three or four times before I had screwed myself up to the point of going in. The thing that dissipated all my feelings of embarrassment in a moment, and brought me back to the eagerness and excitement with which I set out from home, was the sudden appearance of Mr. Luigi's servant, the large, fat, good-humoured Italian, whom I have before mentioned, at the door of one of the houses. The sight of him flushed me at once into determination. I turned immediately to the house where he stood, and of course it was *the* house, the number which Ellis had written down on his paper; there could be no doubt on the subject now.

"I wish to see your mistress," said I, going up to the man, too breathless and eager to waste any words.

He looked at me with good-humoured scrutiny, repeating "Meestress" with a puzzled tone; at last a kind of gay, half-flattered confusion came over his good-humoured face, he put his hand on his heart, made a deprecatory, remonstrating bow, and burst into some laughing mixture of Italian and English, equally unintelligible. The fellow actually

supposed I meant his sweetheart, or pretended to suppose so. I became very angry. He did not look impertinent either; but you may fancy how one would feel, to be supposed capable of such a piece of levity at such a time. And a person of my condition, too! Happily, at this moment the nurse-girl whom I had seen with my pretty young stranger suddenly made her appearance with the baby in her arms. I appealed to her, and though she stared and made answer in words not much more intelligible to me than her fellow-servant's, she showed me upstairs. She was going out with the beautiful baby, but one way and another I was so worried and uncomfortable, and felt so strongly the existence of those plots against us which I was now going to clear up, that I took no notice of the child. I said nothing at all but that I wanted to see her mistress, and walked into the little drawing-room without thinking that I might be going into the young stranger's presence, possibly into the presence of both husband and wife. However, the moment I had entered I saw her; there she was. In my heat and annoyance I went up to her instantly. "Young lady," said I, "you were in the neighbourhood of my house yesterday; you were in our village; I myself saw you approaching the Park. You put some very strange questions to my servant. You must know how harassed and disturbed I have been by inquiries which I don't know the meaning of. What is it all about? What claim has your hus-

band upon the Mortimers? Who is he? What does he want with us?"

I said this without pausing to take breath, for my encounter with the servant, I confess, had irritated me. Now, when I had said my say and come to myself, I looked at her and felt a little shocked. She was certainly changed since yesterday; but before I had time even to make a mental comment on this change, I was entirely confounded by the entrance of a new and unsuspected actor on the scene; *her husband!* evidently her husband; but as unlike Mr. Luigi as one handsome young man could be unlike another, — a bright, open-faced, unmistakable Englishman, a young soldier. The sight of him struck me aghast. What new complication was this?

"If there's going to be any fighting, that's *my* trade," said the new-comer. "We'll change places, Milly darling. Madam, my wife has a great many things to occupy her just now; let me answer for her, if that is possible. I think I know what she has been about."

Saying which, he wheeled the one easy chair in the room towards me, and invited me to sit down. I sat down with the feeling of having somehow deceived myself strangely and made a huge mistake. I could not make it out. Mr. Luigi's servant was below, and this was certainly the young woman whom I had arrested on her way to the Park, and who had asked questions of Ellis in the omnibus.

But who was this handsome young soldier? What had he to do with it? A cold tremble came over me that it was what the newspapers call a mistaken identity, and that somehow I had stumbled in, after the rudest and most unauthorised fashion, into the privacy of two innocent young creatures who knew nothing about the Park.

"Pardon me if I am wrong," I said with a gasp; "I fear I must be wrong, only let me ask one question. Did you speak to a man in the omnibus yesterday about the Mortimers of the Park? or was it not you? I am sure I shall never forgive myself if I have made such a foolish mistake."

"But it is no mistake," said the young wife, who had remained in the room, standing very near the half-open door into the tiny apartment behind. Poor young soul! she was certainly changed in those twenty-four hours. I could scarcely resist an impulse that came upon me, to go up and take her in my arms, and ask the dear young creature what it was that ailed her. Depend upon it, whatever she might have asked about the Mortimers, that face meant no harm. I looked at her so closely, I was so much attracted by her, that I scarcely noticed, till she repeated it, what she said.

"It is no mistake," she said, growing firmer; "I did ask questions. I am sure you are Miss Mortimer — we will tell you how it was. Harry, you will tell Miss Mortimer all about it. I am a little

— a little stupid to-day. I'll go and fetch the books if you will tell Miss Mortimer how it was."

She went away quite simply and quietly. He stood looking after her with a compassionate, tender look, that went to my heart. He did not speak for a moment, and then he said, with a sigh, something that had nothing to do with my mystery. "We got marching orders for the Crimea yesterday," said the dear simple-hearted young fellow, with the tears coming into his honest eyes. "It is very hard upon my poor Milly;" and he broke off with another sigh. If the two had come to me together the next moment, and disclosed a plan to turn us out of our estate or pull the house down over our heads, I could have hugged them in my arms all the same. God bless the dear children! whatever they had to tell, there was but one thing in their thoughts, and that was the parting that was coming. If I had been the hardest heart in the world, that spontaneous confidence must have melted me. As it was, I could hardly help crying over them in their anguish and happiness. People are happy that have such anguishes. I could hardly help exclaiming out aloud, "I'll take care of her!" and yet, dear, dear! to think of human short-sightedness! Had not I come all this way to find them out?

She came back again a minute after, with some old books in her arms. "Have you told Miss Mortimer, Harry?" she asked, pausing with a little surprise to hear no conversation going on between us,

and to see him leaning against the mantel-shelf just as she had left him, with his hand over his eyes. Then she gave him a quick, affectionate, indignant glance — I might say petulant — and came up in her energetic way to the table, where she put down the books. "*I* will tell you, Miss Mortimer," said the brave little woman. "We do not know very much ourselves, but perhaps when you hear our story you can make it plain better than we can. We found it out only by chance."

"My dear," said I, "do not call me Miss Mortimer; my eldest sister is Miss Mortimer. I am called Miss Milly; Millicent Mortimer is my name."

Here the young man broke in suddenly. "*Her* name was Millicent Mortimer too," he cried. "Milly! — that is her name — I beg your pardon, Miss Mortimer; I think there is no name in the world equal to it. She's Milly, named so at her father's desire. Tell me, is she nearly related to you?"

I was so astonished I rose up to my feet and stared at them both. To be sure, I had heard him call her Milly; but my thoughts had been so entirely drawn astray by Mr. Luigi, that I never thought of anything else. I stood perfectly thunderstruck, staring at them. "What are you telling me?" I cried. Really my mind was not in a condition to take in anything that might be said to me. She put the old books towards me one by one. I opened them, not knowing what I did. "Sarah Mortimer,

the Park, 1810." Heaven bless us! Sarah's hand, no doubt about it; but who in the world was *she?*

"Child, take pity on me!" I cried; "with one thing and another I am driven out of my wits. Tell me, for heaven's sake, who was your father? Are you *that* Luigi's sister? Who are you? Where did you come from? God help us! I don't know what to think, or where to turn. Your father, who was he? What do you know about him? Were *you* born in Italy too? What *is* the truth of this wild, dreadful mystery? Sarah may know about it perhaps, but I know nothing, nothing! If you would not have me go out of my senses, child, tell me who you are, and who your father was."

They both gazed at me astonished. "She is Millicent Mortimer," said her young husband, "the child of Richard Mortimer and Maria Connor; she was born in Ireland. Milly! Milly! the old lady is going to faint."

For I sank dead down in my chair, as was natural. I put my hands over my face. I fell a-crying and sobbing in that wonderful, blessed relief. If my worst suspicions had come true, I could have stood up and faced it. But my strength went from me in this delicious, unspeakable comfort. Richard Mortimer's children! The heirs we were looking for! Oh dear! to think I could ever be so distrustful of the good Lord! This was what all the mystery had come to! I sat crying like a fool in my chair, the two looking on at me, thinking

me crazy most likely — most likely wondering, in their innocent grieved hearts, at the old woman crying for nothing. How could they tell what a mountain-load of trouble they had taken off my head?

"My dear," cried I when I could control myself enough, "if you are Richard Mortimer's daughter you're the nearest relation we have. You were to have been advertised for before now — we've been seeking you, or trying to seek you, everywhere. I knew there must be something made my heart warm to you so. My dear, we're the last of the old race; there's nobody but Richard Mortimer's children to carry on the name. God help us! I am a silly old woman. I had taken dreadful fears into my head. Why didn't you come and say it plain out, and turn all my anxiety and troubles into joy? Ah Milly, dear Milly Mortimer! — I could think you were my own child somehow — come and let me kiss you. I am not so weak as this usually, but I'm quite overcome to-day. Come here, child, and let me look at you. It's pleasant to think there's a young Mortimer in the world again."

I was so much engaged with my own feelings, that I did not notice much how the young people were taking it. When I did come to myself a little, they were standing rather irresolute, that pretty young Milly Mortimer looking at me in a kind of longing, reluctant way, either as if she could not take me at my word, or had something on her

mind. As for her husband, he was looking at me too, but with a full eager look, which I understood in a moment; his lip trembling and swelling out a little, his eyes full, his whole face telling its story. When he caught my eye he turned his look upon her, and then back to me again. Do you think I did not understand him? He said, "You will take care of my Milly?" clearer than he could have said it in a thousand words; and if my eyes were slow to answer him, you may be sure it was no fault of will or heart. Seeing she was shy to come to me, and recovering myself, I went to the new Milly and kissed her. I can't tell what a pleasure I took in looking at her. She belonged to me — she was of our very own blood, come from the same old forefathers. I thought nothing strange that I loved her in a moment. It was not love at first sight, it was *natural affection*. That makes a vast difference. Even Sara Cresswell was not like a child of our own family. To think of another Milly Mortimer, pretty, and happy, and young! such a Milly as I might have been perhaps, but never was. I felt very happy in this child of my family. It was half as good as having a child of one's own.

Then they showed me some other books with poor Richard Mortimer's name in them, and his drawing of the Park, and Sarah getting on her horse. Poor fellow! but I rather fear he could not have been any great things of a man. I felt quite easy and light at my heart; nothing seemed to

frighten me. And the two young people even, in the little excitement, forgot their own trouble, which was a comfort to me.

"But all this time, my dear," said I, at length, "you have said nothing about your brother. How did he get to be Italian, — and what did he mean by asking about that lady — and why not come at once to the Park and say out who he was?"

"My brother?" said the young wife, faltering; and gave a wondering look at me, and then turned round, with a habit she seemed to have, to consult her husband with her eyes; "my brother? I am afraid you have not understood. Harry is —"

"I know what Harry is," cried I; "don't tell me about *him*. I mean your brother — your brother. Why, dear, dear child, don't you understand? I met his man at the door of this very house — Mr. Luigi, you know, as they call him; of course he must belong to you."

"Indeed," said the new Milly, with very grave, concerned looks, "I never spoke to him but once in my life; we don't know anything about him. I never had any brother; there were none but me."

I don't think I said anything at all in answer. I said nothing, so far as I know, for a long time after. I sat stupefied, feeling my burden all the heavier because I had deluded myself into laying it off a little. Oh me! we had found the heirs that Sarah had thought so much about; but the cloud

had not dissolved in this pleasant sunshine. Out of my extraordinary sense of relief, I fell into darker despondency than ever. He was not Milly Mortimer's brother, nor anybody belonging to her. Who could he be?

CHAPTER III.

I DON'T know very well how I got to Mr. Cresswell's house. I did manage to get there somehow. I went listlessly through the old-fashioned streets I knew so well, and turned down upon that serious old house with its brick front and rows of windows all covered with Venetian blinds. It met the morning sun full, and that was why the blinds were down; but it had a dismal effect upon me, as anything else would have had at that moment. I know how the rooms look inside when the blinds are down; it throws a chill into one's heart that has known them put down for sadder reasons. I went into the house in the same listless way, like a person in a dream. Somehow I could not take any comfort in those dear young creatures I had just found out. Mr. Luigi, whom I had not found out, returned upon me like a night-mare. Was there no possible way in which this mystery could be discovered? What if I sought an interview with himself and put it to him fairly to tell me who he was? I went into Bob Cresswell's drawing-room, where the windows were open and the sunshine slanting in through the Venetian blinds. It was rather dark, but a green pleasant darkness, the wind stirring the curtains, and now and then knocking the wood of the blinds

softly against the wood-work of the window; a cheerful kind of gloom. Sara's knick-knacks lay scattered about everywhere on the tables, and there were cushions, and ottomans, and screens, and fantastic pieces of ornamental work about, enough to have persuaded a stranger that Sara was the most industrious person in the world. The creature bought them all, you know, at fancy fairs and such absurd places. I am not sure that she ever took a needle in her fingers; but she said herself she had not the slightest intention of saving her poor papa's money; and indeed it was very true.

I was thankful to sit down by myself a little in the silence. Sara was out, it appeared, and I threw myself into an easy-chair, and actually felt the quietness and green-twilight look of the room, with just a touch of sunshine here and there upon the carpet near the windows, a comfort to me. Once again, as you may suppose, I thought it all over; but into the confused crowd of my own thoughts, where Sarah, Carson, Mr. Luigi, his fat servant, my new-found Milly Mortimer, and all her belongings, kept swaying in and out and round about each other, there came gleams of the other people suggested by this room; — Mr. Cresswell trying to make some light out of the confusion, Sara darting about, a mischievous, bewildering little sprite, and even, by some strange incoherency of my imagination, Sara's poor pretty young mother, dead seventeen years ago, flickering about it, with her

melancholy young eyes. Poor sweet lonely creature! I remember her a bride in that very room, with Bob Cresswell who might almost have been her father, very fond, but not knowing a bit what to make of her; and then lying helpless on the sofa, and then fading away out of sight, and the place that had known her knowing her no more. Ah me! I wonder whether that is not the best way of getting an end put to all one's riddles. If Sarah and I had died girls, we should have been girls for ever, — pleasant shadows always belonging to the old house. Now it would be different, very different. When we *were* gone, what story might be told about us? "In their time something dreadful occurred about the succession, proving that they had never any right to the estate;" or "the great law-suit began between the heirs of the younger branch and a supposed son of Squire Lewis." Dear! dear! Who could this young man be? and now here was our real relation, our pretty Milly Mortimer — our true heir, if we were the true heirs of the estate. Dare I let her believe herself the heir of the Park with this mystery hanging over all our heads? Poor dear child, she was thinking more about her husband's marching orders than if a hundred Parks had been in her power. Trouble there, trouble here; everywhere trouble of one sort or another. I declare I felt very tired of it all, sitting in that cool shady drawing-room. I could turn nowhere without finding some aggravation. This is how life serves

us, though it seems such a great thing to keep in life.

"But, godmamma, how in all the world did you come here?" cried Sara Cresswell, springing upon me suddenly, before I had seen her come in, like a kitten as she was; "you who never come to Chester but in great state, to call upon people! It's only one o'clock, and there's no carriage about the streets, and you've got your old brown dress on. How *did* you get here?"

"Never mind, child," said I, a little sharply; "you take away my breath. Suppose you get me some lunch, and don't ask any questions. I am going to stay all day, perhaps all night," I said with a little desperation; "perhaps it's the best thing I could do."

"Godmamma, something has happened!" cried Sara; and she came and knelt down on the stool at my feet, looking up in my face, with cheeks all crimsoned over, and eyes sparkling brighter than I had ever seen them. It was not anxiety but positive expectation that flushed the child's face. I could not help thrusting her away from me with my hand, in the fulness of my heart.

"Child!" cried I, "you are glad! you think something has happened to us, and it flushes you with pleasure. I did not expect as much from you!"

Sara stumbled up to her feet, confused and affronted. She stood a moment irresolute, not sure, apparently, how to take it, or whether to show me

to the full extent how angry and annoyed she was. However, I suppose she remembered that we were in her father's house, and that I was her guest after a fashion; for she stammered some kind of apology. "You took me into your confidence before, and naturally I wanted to know," cried the child, with half-subdued fury. She had never been taught how to manage her temper, and she could not do it when she tried.

"Yes," said I, "we are your godmothers, Sara, and have loved you all your life; but you want to know, just as if it were a story in a novel — though, for all you can tell, it may be something that involves our fortune, or our good name, or our life."

Now this was very foolish of me, and I confess it. It was not anger at Sara that made me say it — nothing of the sort. But I had come through a great deal, and my mind was so full that I could bear no more. It burst from me like something I could not retain, and after that, I am ashamed to confess, I cried. It was merely the excitement and agitation of the day, so unusual to me, and coming after such a long strain of silent excitement as I had already come through.

Sara stood before me confounded. She was quite unprepared for anything of this kind. She kept standing by me in a bewildered way, too much puzzled to say anything. At length she knelt down on the footstool and pressed my hand upon her little

soft mouth. "Something dreadful has happened, godmamma?" said Sara, looking up at me wistfully. The poor child was really alarmed and full of anxiety now.

"No, no," said I, "nothing has happened at all. I am only too nervous and alarmed and unhappy to bear speaking to. I am not unhappy either. Sara, child, can't you leave me by myself a little and order luncheon? I'll tell you all about it then."

Sara got up immediately to do what I told her; but before she left me stole her arm round my neck and kissed me. "I have got such a secret to tell you, godmamma; you'll be so glad when you know," whispered the creature in my ear. Glad! I suppose it would be some of her love affairs, — some deluded young man she was going to marry, perhaps. Well! so I might have been glad, in a manner, if it were a suitable match, and she had taken any other time to tell me; but you may fancy how much happiness I had to spare for anybody now.

It may be imagined that my appetite was not very great in spite of my anxiety about luncheon, but I certainly was glad to have a glass of Mr. Cresswell's nice Madeira after all my fatigue and exhaustion. Sara and I sat opposite to each other in the dining-room, where the blinds were down also, without saying much for some time. She was watching me I could see. There she sat very demure and a little anxious, in her velvet jacket, shaking her short curls, now and then, with an im-

patient kind of motion. I was glad to see that kitten have so much perception of the rights of hospitality; for she allowed me to take my time, and did not torture me with questions, so that I really got the good of this little interval, and was refreshed.

"I ought to be very happy instead of being so nervous and uncomfortable," cried I at last; "for only fancy, my dear child, who I have found. Do you remember when you were at the Park hearing your godmamma Sarah speak of an heir whom she wanted your papa to advertise for? Well, what do you think, Sara? I have actually found her! for she is not an heir but an heiress. What your godmamma Sarah will say when she hears it, I can't think; for she has never been advertised for, you know. She has turned up 'quite promiscuous,' as Ellis says."

"Oh! — so you know!" said Sara, in quite a disappointed tone; "and I thought I had such a secret for you. Well, of course, since you do know, it doesn't matter; they're coming here to-night."

"My dear, I know they are coming here to-night. They told me so; and your papa is to go over the whole, and make it all out how it is. Ah, dear me!" said I with a sigh, "if that were but all!"

"Dear godmamma," said Sara in her coaxing way, "are you not glad? I thought you would certainly be glad to find another Milly Mortimer; but you've got something on your mind."

"Ah, yes, I have something on my mind," said I. "Sara, child, I don't know what to do with myself. I must see this Mr. Luigi before I go home."

"You can't, godmamma; he is not in Chester," cried Sara, with a sudden blush. "As soon as he found out — the very next morning at least — he went away to fetch some things he had left behind."

"Found out what?"

Sara put her hands together with a childish appealing motion. "Indeed, I do not know — indeed, dear godmamma, I do not know. If you think it wrong of me to have spoken to him, I am very sorry, but I can't help it. I met him at Mrs. Langham's, you know, — and he saw Sarah Mortimer written in her book. And the next morning he met me, — I mean I met him — we happened to meet in the street — and he told me he had found the clue he wanted, and was going to fetch some things he had put in safety in London — and I know he has not come back."

"How do you know he has not come back?" said I.

Sara thought I was thinking of her, and the child blushed and looked uneasy; I observed as much, but I did not till long afterwards connect it with Mr. Luigi. I was too impatient to know about himself.

"Because I should have seen him," said Sara,

faltering. It did not come into my head to inquire why she was so sure she would have seen him. My thoughts were occupied about my own business. I groaned in my heart over her words. Not yet was I to discover this mystery. Not yet was I to clear my mind of the burden which surely, surely, I could not long go on bearing. *It* must come to an end, or me.

CHAPTER IV.

After what Sara had told me I felt in great doubt as to what I should do. Staying in Chester, even for a night, was against my habits, and might make people talk. Ellis, of course, would be very wise over it among the servants, and the chances were that it might alarm Sarah; but at the same time I could not return there in the same state of uncertainty. I could not meet her face to face again, and see her going on with her knitting in that dreadful inhuman way. Having once broken out of my patience, it seemed to me quite impossible to return to it. I felt as if I could only go and make a scene with Sarah, and demand to know what it was, and be met by some cruel cold denial that she understood anything about it, which would, of course, — feeling sure that she understood it all, but having no sure ground on which I could contradict her, — put me half out of my senses. On the whole, staying in Chester all night could do no harm. If Ellis talked about it, and pretended that he knew quite well what I had gone about, I dare say it was no more than he had done already, and would be very well inclined to do again. One must always pay the penalty for having faithful old servants, and, really, if my absence frightened

Sarah, so much the better. She ought not to be allowed to go on placidly congratulating herself on having shut out this poor young man. If we were wronging him, what a cruel, cruel, miserable thing it was of Sarah to be glad of having balked him and driven him away! It is dreadful to say such things of one's own only sister, but one does get driven out of patience. Think of all I had come through, and the dreadful doubt hanging over me! I had kept very quiet for a long time and said nothing to anybody; but now that I had broken out, I fear I was in rather an unchristian state of mind.

All that afternoon I kept quiet, and rested behind the green blinds in Mr. Cresswell's half-lighted drawing-room. How Sara ever has got into the way of enduring that half light I can't imagine; or rather I should say I don't believe she uses this room at all, but has the back drawing-room, where the window is from which she could see down into the poor curate's rooms, and watch his wife dressing the baby, as she told me long ago. You can see the street, too, from an end window in that back drawing-room; perhaps that is how she would have known if Mr. Luigi had come back, for I am pretty sure, from the glimpses I had when the doors opened, that the blinds were not down *there*. She received her visitors in the back drawing-room that afternoon. I heard them come and go, with their dresses rustling about, and their fresh young voices.

Of course I neither heard nor listened what they were talking of; but dear, to hear how eager the creatures were in their talk! as if it were anything of any consequence. I sat with that hum now and then coming to my ears, bewildering myself with my own fancies. If I could have read a book or a paper, or given my mind to anything else, it would have been a great deal better for me; but my disorder of mind, you see, had come to a crisis, and I was obliged to let it take its way.

It was not without a good deal of difficulty and embarrassment that Mr. Cresswell and I met. He was a little uncomfortable himself with the same feelings he had shown a spark of at the Park, and unduly anxious to let me see that he had lost no time in inquiring about the Langhams, — that was the name of the young people, — as soon as he heard of them, and had meant to come out to us next day and tell us the result. For my part, I was a great deal more embarrassed than he was. I could scarcely help letting him see that this new heiress was a very small part of my excitement and trouble; indeed, had no share in the trouble at all, for as much as I could give my mind to think of her, was pure pleasure; but at the same time my heart revolted from telling him my real difficulty. He, I dare say, had never once connected the young Italian, whom everybody in Chester knew something about, with us or our family; and I was so perfectly unable to say what it was I feared, that a shrewd

precise man like Cresswell would have set it down at once merely as a woman's fancy. At the same time, you know, I was quite unpractised in the art of concealing my thoughts. I betrayed to him, of course, a hundred times that I had something on my mind. I dare say he remembered from the time of our last interview that I looked to have something on my mind, and he made a great many very skilful efforts to draw it out. He talked of Sarah, with private appeals to me in the way of looks and cunning questions to open my mind about her; and, to tell the truth, it cost me a little self-denial, after we really got into conversation, not to say something, and put his shrewdness on the scent. I dare say he might have worried out the secret somehow or another; but I did not commit myself. I kept my own counsel closely, to his great surprise. I could see he went away baffled when it was nearly time for dinner. And he was not at all pleased to be baffled either, or to think that I was too many for him. I felt sure now I should have to be doubly on my guard, for his pride was piqued to find it all out.

I can't tell anybody what a comfort it was to my heart when my new Milly Mortimer came. If the two had been very bright and elated about finding themselves heirs to a great estate I might have been disgusted, glad as I was to know about them; for, to be sure, one does not like one's heirs to be *very* triumphant about wealth they can only

have after one's own death. But something more than houses or lands was in that young creature's mind. She was wonderfully steady and cheerful, but never for a moment lost out of her eyes the consciousness of what was going to happen to her. It was not mere sympathy, you know, that made me know so well how she was feeling, for, to be sure, I never was in her circumstances nor anything like them; it was because I was her relation, and had a natural insight into her mind. I don't believe Sara had the least perception of it. When we came upstairs after dinner, leaving that fine young soldier, whom really I felt quite proud of, with Mr. Cresswell, this came out wonderfully, and in a way that went to my heart. Sara, who was extremely affectionate to her, set her in an easy-chair and brought her a footstool, and paid her all those caressing little attentions which such kittens can be so nice about when they please. "I am so glad you have come to know my godmamma just now," said Sara, kissing her, "because she will know how to comfort you when Mr. Langham goes away."

My Milly said nothing for a moment; she rather drew herself away from Sara's kiss. She did not lean back, but sat upright in her chair, and put away the stool with her foot. "I am a soldier's wife," she said the next minute in the most unspeakable tone, with a kind of sob that did not sound, but only *showed*, in a silent heave of her breast. Ah, the dear child! have not soldiers' wives

a good call to be heroes too? I drew Sara away from her in a sort of passion; that velvet creature with her sympathy and her kisses, when the other was hanging on the edge of such a parting! If one could do nothing for the sweet soul, one might have the charity to leave her alone.

But after a while I drew Milly into talking of herself, for I was naturally anxious to know all about her, and where she had been brought up, and how she had found out that she belonged to us. We all knew that young Langham and Mr. Cresswell were going over the papers that her husband had brought with him, and setting it all straight; but as I never had any doubt from the moment I saw those books of hers, I was much more anxious to know from Milly herself how she had spent her life. She told us with a little reserve about her Irish friends and her odd bringing up, and then how she had met with Harry. She told you all about that herself, I know, a great deal better than I could repeat it, and fuller, too, than she told us. But when she got fully into that story, she could not help forgetting herself and the present circumstances a little. Sara sat on a stool before her, with her hands clasped on her knees, devouring every word. Certainly Sara took a wonderful interest in it. I never saw her so entirely carried away by interest and sympathy. When Milly was done, the creature jumped up and defied me.

"You couldn't blame her; you couldn't have the

heart to blame her! It was just what she ought to have done!" cried Sara, with her face in such a commotion, all shining, and blushing, and dewy with tears. I was confounded by her earnest looks. It was very interesting, certainly, but there was nothing to transport her into such a little rapture as that.

"Child, be quiet," said I; "you are determined to do me some harm, surely. I don't blame Milly. She thought she had nobody belonging to her, though she was mistaken there. My dear, you have one old woman belonging to you that will expect a great deal, I can tell you. I can feel somehow, as if it might have been me you were telling of, if I had ever been as pretty or as young ——"

"Godmamma, such nonsense!" cried Sara; "you must have been as young once; and if you were not far prettier than godmamma Sarah, I will never believe my eyes!"

"Your godmamma Sarah was a great beauty," said I; "but that is nothing to the purpose. If I had ever been as young and as pretty as this Milly Mortimer, I might have fallen in with a Harry too, who knows? and it might not have been any the better for you, my dear child; so it's just as well that things are as they are. But, all the same, I can't help thinking that it might have been my story you're telling. There's a great deal in a name, whatever people may say. I shall think the second Milly is to go through all the things the first Milly

only wondered about. I never had any life of my own to speak of. You have one already. I shall think I have got hold of that life, that always slipped through my fingers, when I see you going through with it. I shall never feel myself an odd person again."

"Ah! but life is not happiness," burst from my poor Milly's lips in spite of herself; then she hastily drew up again: "I mean it is not play," she said, after a while.

"If it were play, it would be for children; it is heavy work and sore," cried I; "that much I know, you may be sure; but then there are words said, that one can never forget, about him that endureth to the end."

Such words were comfort to *me;* but not just to that young creature in the intolerable hope and anguish she had in her heart. She was not thinking of any end; I was foolish to say it; and after all I knew more of life than she did — far more! and knew very well it did not spring on by means of heart-breaking events like the parting she was thinking of, or joyful ones like the meeting again which already she had set all her heart and life on, but crept into days and days like the slow current it had been to me. Sara, however, as was natural, was impatient of this talk. I believe she had something on her mind too.

"You do not blame your Milly, godmamma?" she cried, a little spitefully; "but I suppose you

would blame any other poor girl; as if people were always to do what was told them, and like such people as they were ordered to like! You old people are often very cruel. Of course you would blame everyone else in the world?"

"I should certainly blame *you*," cried I, "if you should venture to think you might deceive your good father, that never denied you anything in his life. You velvet creature, what do you know about it? You never had an unkind word said to you, nor the most foolish wish in your little perverse heart denied. If you were to do such a thing, I could find it in my heart to lock you up in the garret and give you bread and water. It would not be a simple-hearted young creature with every excuse in the world for her, but a little cheat and traitor, and unnatural little deceiver. There! you are a wicked creature, but you are not so bad as that. If you said it yourself I should not believe it of you!"

But to my amazement the child stood aghast, too much dismayed, apparently, to be angry, and faltered out, "Believe what?" with her cheeks suddenly growing so pale that she frightened me. The next moment she had rushed into the back drawing-room, and from thence disappeared, — for I went to look after her, — fairly flying either from herself or me. I was entirely confounded. I could not tell what to make of it. Was little Sara in a mystery too?

"If I am betraying Sara, I am very sorry," said Milly, when I looked to her for sympathy; "but I fear, though they don't know it themselves, that she and the Italian gentleman are thinking more of each other, perhaps, than they ought."

She had scarcely finished speaking when Sara returned, dauntless and defiant. "I rushed away to see whether your note had gone to godmamma Sarah," said the daring creature, actually looking into my very eyes. "A sudden dreadful thought struck me that it had been forgotten. But it is all right, godmamma; and now I think we might have some tea."

CHAPTER V.

THE gentlemen came upstairs looking very cheerful and friendly, so of course everything had been satisfactory in their conversation. After a little while Mr. Cresswell came to tell me all about it. He said the papers seemed all quite satisfactory, and he had no doubt Mrs. Langham was really Richard Mortimer's daughter, the nearest, and indeed only relation, on the Mortimer side of the house, that we had in the world.

"I had no doubt about it," said I; "but I am very glad, all the same, to have it confirmed. Now, my dear child, you know that we belong to each other. My sister and I are, on your father's side, the only relations you have in the world."

Milly turned round to receive the kiss I gave her, but trembled and looked as if she dared not lift her eyes to me. Somehow I believe that idea which brightened her husband, came like a cold shadow between her and me, the thought that I would take care of her when he was away. It was very unreasonable, to be sure; but, dear, dear, it was very natural! I did not quarrel with her for the impulse of her heart.

"But softly, softly, my dear lady," said Mr. Cresswell; "the papers all *seem* very satisfactory, I

admit; but you ladies are always jumping at conclusions. I shall have to get my Irish correspondent to go over the whole matter, and test it, step by step. Not but that *I* am perfectly satisfied; but nobody can tell what may happen. A suit might arise, and some of these documents might be found to have a flaw in it. We must be cautious, very cautious, in all matters of succession."

"A suit! Why, wouldn't Richard Mortimer, if he were alive, be heir-at-law? Who could raise a suit?" cried I.

I suppose he saw that there was some anxiety in my look which I did not express; and, to be sure, he owed me something for having thwarted and baffled him. "There is no calculating what mysterious claimant might appear," said Mr. Cresswell, quite jauntily. "I heard somebody say, not very long ago, that all the romance there was now-a-days came through the hands of conveyancers and attorneys. My dear lady, leave it to me; I understand my own business, never fear."

I felt as if a perfect fever possessed me for the moment. My pulse beat loud, and my ears rang and tingled. "Was mysterious claimant could there be to the Park?" I cried. I betrayed myself. He saw in a moment that this was the dread that was on my mind.

"Quite impossible to say. I know no loophole one could creep in through," he said, with a little shrug of his shoulders and pretended laugh. "But

these things defy all probabilities. It is best to make everything safe for our young friends here."

Now this, I confess, nettled me exceedingly; for though we had taken so much notice of his daughter, and had lived so quietly for many years, neither Sarah nor I had ever given up the pretensions of the Mortimers to be one of the first families in the county. And to hear an attorney speaking of "our young friends here," as if they were falling heirs to some old maiden lady's little bit of property! I was very much exasperated.

"It seems to me, Mr. Cresswell, that you make a little mistake," said I. "Our family is not in such a position that its members could either be lost or found without attracting observation. In a different rank of life such things might happen; but the Mortimers, and all belonging to them, are too well known among English families, if I am not mistaken, to allow of *any* unknown connections turning up."

Mr. Cresswell immediately saw that he had gone too far, and he muttered a kind of apology and got out of it the best way he could. I drew back my chair a little, naturally indignant. But Cresswell, whose father and his father's father had been the confidential agents of our family, who knew very well what we had been, and what we *were* whenever we chose to assert ourselves, — to think of him, a Chester attorney, patronising our heirs and successors! You may imagine I had a good right to be angry,

and especially as I could see he was quite pluming himself on his cleverness in finding out what was in my mind. He thought it was a whim that had taken possession of me, no doubt, — a kind of monomania. I could even see, as he thought it all quietly over by himself over his cup of tea, what a smile came upon his face.

Young Langham, however, just then contrived to gain my attention. He did it very carefully, watching his opportunities when Milly was not looking at him, or when he thought she was not looking at him. "I am heartily glad to have found you out now, of all times," said the young man. "Milly would not have gone to her relations in Ireland, and I have no relations. She will be very lonely when we are gone. Poor Milly! It is a hard life I have brought her into, and she so young."

"You are not much older yourself," said I; "and if you children bring such trouble on yourselves, you must be all the braver to bear it. I doubt if she'd change with Sara Cresswell at this moment, or any other unmarried young creature in the world."

The young man looked up at me gratefully. "I can't tell you how good she is," he said in his simplicity. "She never breaks down nor complains of anything. I don't understand how she has saved and spared our little means and made them do; but she has, somehow. Now, though she's pale with thinking of this — don't you think she's pale? but I forgot, you never saw her before — she has set

all her mind upon my outfit, and will hear of nothing else. I wish it were true what the books say. I wish one's young wife could comfort herself with thoughts of glory and honour; indeed, I wish one could do as much one's self," said the good young fellow, with a smile and sigh. "I fear I am only going, for instance, because I must go; and that I'll cast many a look behind me on my Milly left alone. She's just twenty," he said, with an affectionate look at her which brought her eyes upon us and our conversation, and interrupted so far the confidential character of the interview between him and me.

"Say nothing about it just now," said I, hurriedly, "it only vexes her to hear you talk of what she is to do; leave her alone, dear soul — but at the same time don't be afraid. The very day you go I'll fetch her to the Park. She shall be our child while you are away — and it is to the Park you shall come when you come home. But say nothing about it now. She cannot bear to think of it at present. When the worst is over she'll breathe again. Hush! don't let her hear us now!"

"But you know her, though you don't know her," said he, under his breath, with a half-wondering grateful look at me that quite restored my good-humour. I remember I nodded at him cheerfully. Know her! I should like to know who had as good a right! These young creatures can't understand how many things an old woman knows.

Here Milly came up to us, a little jealous, think-

ing somehow we were plotting against her. "Harry is talking to you of something?" she said, with a little hesitation in her voice.

"On the subject we both like best, just now," said I. "But I wish you both to go with me to the Park. You can manage it, can you not? The dear baby, and the little nurse, and — but the fat Italian? Ah! he doesn't belong to you."

"No! he was in great triumph to-night; his master has come home," said young Langham. "He does not belong to us; but he is a devoted slave of Milly's for all that."

"His master came home to-night!" I repeated the words over to myself involuntarily; and then a sudden thought struck me in the feverish impulse which came with that news. "Children," said I, with a little gasp, "it is deeply to all our interest to know who that young man is. I can never rest, nor take comfort in anything till I know. Will you try to have him with you to-morrow, and I will come and speak to him? Hush! neither the Cresswells nor anybody is to know; it concerns only us Mortimers. Will you help me to see him at your house?"

"Your are trembling," said Milly, suddenly taking hold of my hand. "Tell Harry what it is and he will do it. He is to be trusted; but it will agitate you."

"I cannot tell Harry, for I do not know," cried I, below my breath, leaning heavily upon the arm,

so firm and yet so soft, that had come to my aid. "But I will take Harry's support and yours. It shall be in your house. Whatever is to be said shall be said before you. Thank heaven! if I do get agitated and forget myself you will remember what he says."

"It is something that distresses you?" said the young stranger, once more looking into my face, not curious but wistful. I should have been angry had Sara Cresswell asked as much. I was glad and comforted to see Milly anxious on my account.

"I cannot tell what it is; but whatever it is, it is right that you should know all about it," said I. "For anything I can tell you it may interfere both with your succession and ours. I can't tell you anything about it, that is the truth! I know no more than your baby does how Mr. Luigi can have any connection with our family; but he has a connection somehow — that is all I know. To-morrow, to-morrow, please God! we'll try to find out what it is."

The two young people were a good deal startled by my agitation; perhaps, as was natural, they were also moved by the thought of another person who might interfere with the inheritance that had just begun to dazzle their eyes; but as I leaned back in my chair, exhausted with the flutter that came over me at the very thought of questioning Mr. Luigi, my eyes fell upon Mr. Cresswell, still sipping a cup of tea, and quietly watching me over the top of his

spectacles; and at the same moment Sara came in from the back drawing-room with great agitation and excitement in her face. I could see that she scarcely could restrain herself from coming to me and telling me something; but with a sudden guilty glance at her father, and a sudden unaccountable blush, she stole off into a corner, and, of all the wonderful things in the world, produced actually *some work* out of some fantastic ornamental work-table or other! That was certainly a new development in Sara. But I could read in her face that she had seen him too. She too had somehow poked her curls into this mystery. All around me, everybody I looked at, were moved by it, into curiosity or interest, or something deeper — I, the principal person in the business, feeling them all look at me, could only feel the more that I was going blindfold to, I could not tell what danger or precipice. Blindfold! but at least it should be straight-forward. I knew that much of the to-morrow, which it made me tremble with excitement to think of; but I knew nothing more.

PART VI.

THE LIEUTENANT'S WIFE.

(Continued.)

CHAPTER I.

My dear old relation whom we have found out so suddenly, and whom I am quite ashamed to have once thought to be a kind of usurper of something that belonged to me, has been too much distressed and troubled altogether about this business to have the trouble of writing it down as well; and I have so little, so strangely little, to take up my time just now. The days are somehow all blank, with nothing ever happening in them. In my mind I can always see the ship making way over the sea, with the same rush of green water, and the same low-falling, quiet sky, and no other ships in sight. It has been very quiet weather — that is a great mercy. They should be almost landed there by this time.

But that is not my business just now. My dear Aunt Milly — it is true she is only my father's cousin, but cousin is an awkward title between people of such different age, and, according to Sara Cresswell, she is my aunt, *à la mode de Bretagne*, which I don't mind adopting without any very close inquiry into its meaning — made an engagement with us to come to our house the next morning after that first day we met her. Harry came home from the Cress-

wells that night in raptures with Aunt Milly. It was rather hard upon me to see him so pleased. Of course I knew very well what made him so pleased. He thought he had secured a home for me. He was never tired praising her in his way. I am not exactly sure whether she herself would have relished the praises he gave her, because he has a sad habit of talking slang like all the rest. But apart from any reason, he *took to her*, which it is a great pleasure to think of now. When we got home Mr. Luigi's window was blazing with light just as it had done when he returned before; for Domenico seems to be quite of the opinion that candles are articles of love and welcome as well as of devotion. Harry, who had quite made acquaintance with the Italian gentleman when he was at home before, went in to see him, and I went upstairs to baby. I used to take comfort in getting by myself a little, just at that time. Ten minutes in my own room in the dark did me a great deal of good. When one takes an opportunity and gets it out of one's heart now and then, one can go on longer and better — at least I have found it so.

Lizzie, always watchful, was very ready to let me hear that she was close at hand. The moment she heard me open my own room-door, she began to move about in the back apartment where she kept watch over baby, and I do believe it was only by dint of strong self-denial that she did not burst in upon me at once. I can't fancy what she thought

would happen if I "gave way." It must have taken some very terrible shape to her fancy. After I had my moment of repose, I went to baby's room. He was asleep like a little cherub in Mrs. Goldsworthy's old wicker-work cradle, which I had trimmed with chintz for him; and Lizzie sat by the table working, but looking up at me with her sharp suspicious eyes — sidelong inquisitive looks, full of doubts of my fortitude, and anxiety for me. It was all affection, poor child. When one has affectionate creatures about one, it is impossible to be hard or shut one's self up. I had no choice but to stop and tell Lizzie about my new friend.

"Oh, it was thon leddy was at the muckle gates, and warned us away for the king-cough," cried Lizzie; "I minded her the very moment at the door. I was as sure as could be from the first look that it was some friend."

"Some friend," in Lizzie's language meant some relation. I asked in wonder, "Why?"

But Lizzie could not explain why; it was one of those unreasonable impressions which are either instinctively prophetic, or which are adopted unconsciously after the event has proved them true.

"But you were never slow where help was needed or comfort," said Lizzie, dropping her eyes and ashamed of her own compliment; "and I kent there was somebody to be sent to comfort *you;* and wha could it be but a friend? For naebody could take you like the way you took me."

I suppose Lizzie's view of things, being the simplest, had power over me. I was struck by this way of regarding it. Perhaps I had not just been thinking of what was *sent*. I felt as if that tight binding over my heart relaxed a little. Ah! so well as the Sender knew all about it — all my loneliness, dismay, and troubles; all my Harry's risks and dangers; all our life beyond — inscrutable dread life which I dared not attempt to look at — and everything that was in it. I held my breath, and was silent in this wide world that opened out to me through Lizzie's words.

"And eh, mem," cried Lizzie, opening her eyes wide, "I was sent for down the stair."

"Where?" cried I in astonishment.

"I was sent for down the stair," said Lizzie, with the oddest blush and twist of her person. "Menico, he's aye been awfu' ill at me since I wouldna gang to the play-house after it was a' settled — as if I could gang to play mysel' the very day the news came! and eh, when he came up and glowered in at the door, and Mrs. Goldsworthy beside him, and no a person but me in *oor* house, I was awfu' feared. Her being English, they were like twa foreigners thegither; and how was I to ken what they were wantin'? The only comfort I had was mindin' upon the Captain's sword. It was aye like a protection. But a' they said was that Mrs. Goldsworthy would stop beside baby, and I was to gang down the stair and speak to the gentleman. I

thought shame to look as if I was feared — but I was awfu' feared for a' that."

"And what then?"

"I had to gang," said Lizzie, holding down her head; "*he* was sleeping sound, and I kent I could hear the first word o' greetin' that was in his head; *I* could hear in ony corner o' the house; and Mrs. Goldsworthy gied me her word she would sit awfu' quiet and no disturb him. Eh, mem, are ye angry? I never did it afore, and I'll never do it again."

"No, you must not do it again," said I; "but who wanted you downstairs?"

"Eh, it was the Italian gentleman," said Lizzie; "and it was a' about the leddy that was here the day. He wanted to ken if she was wanting *him;* and then he wanted to hear if I kent her, and what friend she was to you; but it was mostly a' to make certain that it wasn't *him* she wanted — as if a leddy like you was likely to have ony troke wi' foreigners or strange men! and there was aye the other blatter to Menico in their ain language — and ower again, and ower again to me, if it wasna *him* she asked for. And me standing close at the door listening for baby, and thinking shame to be there, and awfu' feared you would be angry. I would like to ken what the like of him had to do wi' leddies? — and Menico, too, that might have kent better — but there's naebody will behave to please folk perfect in this world."

"But this is very strange news," said I. "What did you say, Lizzie? did you say it was Miss Mortimer, and that she was a relation of mine."

"Eh, no me!" cried Lizzie. "Ye might think it to see me so silly, but I wasna that daft. I said it was ane on a visit to the leddy. *I* had nae ado with it ony mair than that, and I'm sure neither had he."

Here Harry's voice sounded from below, calling me, and I left Lizzie somewhat amused by her cautious and prudent answer, and not a little curious to see that the Italian was interested about the old lady as well as she about him. I found Harry quite full of the same story. Mr. Luigi had questioned him with great caution about Miss Mortimer, and of course had heard the entire story from Harry of our relationship, and how we found each other out. He had received it very quietly, without expressing any feeling at all, and had asked some very close questions about her and about the Park, and her other sister. Harry could not make him out. Of course neither of us knew the other sister. Evidently it was a mysterious business somehow. But as we knew nothing whatever about it, we soon came to an end of our speculations. The morning, perhaps, as Aunt Milly thought, would clear it all up.

CHAPTER II.

THE morning came, and a very lovely morning it was, as bright and almost as warm as summer, one of those glimpses of real spring which come to us only by days at a time. Aunt Milly came almost before we had finished breakfast. I dare say she is accustomed to early hours; but it was evidently strong anxiety and excitement that had brought her out so soon to-day. I had told Lizzie she was coming, and Lizzie, either with some perception of the real nature of her visit, which I could not in any way account for, or with natural Scotch jealousy and reluctance to satisfy the curiosity of strangers as to our relationship, kept on the watch after she had given baby into my charge, and got her triumphantly into the house without any intervention on the part of Domenico. Aunt Milly sank into a chair, very breathless and agitated. It was some time before she could even notice little Harry. To see her so made me more and more aware how serious this business, whatever it was, must be.

"But I am too early, I suppose?" she said with a little gasp.

Harry thought it was rather too early, unless he were to tell Mr. Luigi plainly what he was wanted for, which she would not permit him to do. It was

a very uncomfortable interval. She sat silent, evidently with her whole mind bent upon the approaching interview. We, neither knowing the subject of it, nor what her anxiety was, had nothing to say, and I was very glad when Harry went downstairs to find the Italian. Then Aunt Milly made a hurried communication to me when we were alone, which certainly did not explain anything, but which still she evidently felt to be taking me into her confidence.

"My dear, Sarah knows something about him," said Aunt Milly; "somehow or other Sarah knows that he has a claim upon us. When she heard of the inquiries he was making, she was in a state of desperation — used to drive out with the carriage blinds down, poor soul, and kept watching all day long, so wretched and anxious that it would have broken your heart. But how it all is, and how about this Countess, and his being named Luigi, and his claim upon the estate, and her knowing him — though, so far as I can judge, he could be no more than born when she came home — Hark! was that somebody coming upstairs?"

It was only some of the people of the house moving about. Aunt Milly gave a sigh of relief. "My dear, I'm more and more anxious since I've found *you*, to know the worst," she said. "It is as great a mystery to me as to your baby, how he can have any connection with us. Dear, dear! to think of a quiet family, and such a family as the Mor-

timers, plunged all at once into some mystery! it is enough to break one's heart; — but then, you see, Sarah was so long abroad."

"Was she long abroad?" said I, with a little cry. All at once, and in spite of myself, my old fancy about that old Miss Mortimer, whom I imagined living in my grandfather's house, came back to my mind. The great beauty whom my good Mrs. Saltoun had seen abroad — how strange if this should be her after all! Somehow my old imaginations had looked so true at the time, that I seemed to remember them as if they were matters of fact and not of fancy. I looked up, quite with a consciousness that I knew something about it, in Aunt Milly's face.

"What do you know about her?" cried Aunt Milly, rising up quite erect and rigid out of her chair. Her excitement was extreme. She had evidently gone beyond the point at which she could be surprised to find any stranger throwing light upon her mystery. But at that moment those steps for which we had been listening did ascend the stairs. We could hear them talking as they approached, the Italian with his accent and rather solemn dictionary English, and Harry's voice that sounded so easy in comparison. Aunt Milly sank back again into her chair. She grasped the arms of it to support herself, and gave me a strange half-terrified, half-courageous look. In another moment they had entered the room.

Mr. Luigi came in without any idea, I dare say, of the anxiety with which we awaited him; but he had not been a minute in the room when his quick eye caught Aunt Milly, though she had drawn back with an involuntary movement of withdrawal from the crisis she had herself brought on. I could read in his face, the instant he saw her, that he divined the little contrivance by which he had been brought here. He stood facing her after he had paid his respects to me, and took no notice of the chair Harry offered him. As for Harry and I, not knowing whether they really knew each other, or whether they ought to be named to each other, or what to do, we stood very uncomfortable and embarrassed behind. I said "Miss Mortimer," instinctively, to lessen the embarrassment if I could. I don't believe he heard me. *He* knew Miss Mortimer very well, however it was.

And it was he who was the first to break the silence. He made a kind of reverence to her, more than a bow, like some sort of oldfashioned filial demonstration. "Madame has something to say to me?" he asked, with an anxiety in his face almost equal to her own.

"Yes," cried Aunt Milly, "I — I have something to say to you. Sit down, and let me get breath."

He sat down, and so did we. To see her struggling to overcome the great tremor of excitement she had fallen into, and we all waiting in

silence for her words, must have been a very strange scene. It was the merest wonder and curiosity, of course, with Harry and me; but I remember noticing even at that moment that Mr. Luigi was not surprised. He evidently knew something to account for her agitation. He sat looking at her, bending towards her in visible expectation of something. It was no mystery to him.

"Sir — young man," cried Aunt Milly, with a gasp, "I do not know you; you are a stranger, a foreigner; you have nothing to do with this place. What, in the name of heaven, is it that you have to do with mine or me?"

Mr. Luigi's countenance fell. He was bitterly disappointed; it was evident in his face. He drew a long breath and clasped his hands together, half in resignation, half appealing against some hard fate. "Ah!" he said, "I did hope otherwise — is it, indeed, indeed, that you know not *me?*"

Aunt Milly gave a cry half of terror. "I recognise your voice," she said, "I see gleams in your face of faces I know. I am going out of my wits with bewilderment and trouble; but as sure as you are there before me, I know no more who you are than does the child who cannot speak."

Mr. Luigi made no reply for some minutes. Then he made some exclamations in Italian, scarcely knowing, I am sure, what he was saying. Then he remembered himself. "Thing most strange! thing most terrible!" cried the young man; "not even

now! — not even now!" and he looked round to us with such distress and amazement in his face, and with such an involuntary call for our sympathy, though we knew nothing about it, that his look went to my heart. Aunt Milly saw it, and was confounded by it. His genuine wonder and strange grieved consciousness that she ought to have known this secret, whatever it was, stopped her questions upon her lips. She sat leaning forward looking at him, struck dumb by his looks. I was so excited by this extraordinary interview, and by the evident reserve on both sides, which implied the existence of a third person whom neither would name, that I burst into it, on the spur of the moment, without thinking whether what I said was sensible or foolish. "Who?" I cried, "who is the other person that knows?"

Both of them started violently; then their eyes met in a strange look of intelligence. Aunt Milly fell back in her chair trembling dreadfully, trembling so much that her very teeth chattered. Mr. Luigi rose. "I am at Madame's disposition," he said softly; "but what can I say? It is better I be gone while I do not harm Madame, and make her ill. Pardon! it is not I who am to blame!"

Saying so, he took Aunt Milly's hand, kissed it, and turned to the door. She called him back faintly. "Stop, I have not asked you rightly," said poor Aunt Milly. "Could not you tell me, without minding anybody else? Are you — are you? — oh!

who are you? I do beseech you tell me. If wrong is done you, I have no hand in it. What is there to prevent you telling me?"

"Ah, pardon. I know my duty," said the young man. "If she *will* reject me — then! but it is yet too early. I wait — I expect — she has not yet said it to me."

Aunt Milly gathered herself up gradually, with a strange fluttered look in her eyes. "*Reject* you! God bless us! it is some mistake, after all. Do you know who it is you are speaking of? Do you know if it is my sister Sarah? She is my elder sister, ten years older than me, — old enough to be your mother — is it she? or, oh, God help us! is it a mistake?"

Mr. Luigi turned towards me for a moment, with a face melted out of all reserve, into such affectionateness and emotion as I scarcely ever saw on a man's face. When she named her sister's age, he said, "Ah!" with a tone as if her words went to his heart. But that was all. He shook his head. He said, "No more, no more," and went slowly but steadily away. It was no mistake. What she said conveyed no information to him. He knew *that* Sarah's age and all about her, better than her sister did, or I was mistaken. What he said, and still more what he looked, brought a strong sudden impression to my mind. I don't know yet how I can be right — if I am right it is the strangest thing in the world; but I know it darted into my head that morning

when Luigi's face melted out so strongly, and that cry which explained nothing came from his heart.

In the meantime, however, poor Aunt Milly sat wringing her hands and more troubled than ever, repeating to herself bits of the conversation which had just passed, and bits of other conversations which we knew nothing about. Harry and I, a little uncomfortable, still tried to occupy ourselves so that we should not hear anything she did not want us to hear; but we did not wish to leave her either. At last Harry went out altogether and left her alone with me, and by degrees she calmed down. I do not wonder she was painfully excited. There could be little doubt some strange, unnatural secret was concealed in her house.

"But you heard him say *reject*," said Aunt Milly, — "if she rejected him — do you feel quite sure he understood my last question? Not knowing a language very well makes a wonderful difference; and what if he supposed my sister a *young* woman, Milly? When I began to be troubled about this business, I couldn't but think that it was some old lover Sarah was afraid of meeting, forgetting the lapse of time. She was a great beauty once, you know. How do you suppose, now, an old woman could *reject* a young man?"

"But there are other meanings of the word than as it is between young women and young men," said I; "he might mean *disown*."

"He might mean *disown*," repeated Aun Milly

slowly, — "*disown*; but, dear, dear child," she cried, immediately throwing off her first puzzled hypothesis, and falling back at once into the real subject of her trouble, "what can he be to Sarah that she could *disown* him? Before you can disown a person he must belong to you. How could Mr. Luigi belong to my sister? but, to be sure, it is folly to put such questions to you that know nothing about it. Milly, dear, I'll have to go home."

"I am very, very sorry you are going home disappointed," said I.

"Yes," said Aunt Milly, with a great sigh, "it is hard to think one's somehow involved in doing wrong, my dear; it's hard to live in the house with your nearest friend, and not to know any more of her than if she were a stranger. What was I saying? I never said so much to any creature before. I take you as if you belonged to me, though you scarcely know me yet, Milly. I'd like you to settle to come out as soon as possible, dear. I'd like you to see Sarah, and tell me what you think. Perhaps — there is no telling — she might say something to *you*."

"But will she be pleased to know about us?" said I.

"It was *her* desire to seek for you," said Aunt Milly. "She thought of that, somehow, just before this trouble came on. Sometimes it has come into my mind, that she thought if she had found your

father, he would have protected her somehow. I can't tell: it is all a great mystery to me."

And so she went away after a while, looking very sorrowful; but came back to tell me to put my bonnet on and come with her to Mr. Cresswell's, who was to drive her home. On our way there I suddenly felt her grasp my arm and point forward a little way before us, where Mr. Luigi was walking slowly along the road by Sara Cresswell's side. Aunt Milly came almost to a dead stop, looking at them. They were not arm-in-arm, nor did they look as if they had met *on purpose*. I dare say it was only by accident. Sara, as usual, was dressed in a great velvet jacket, much larger and wider than those she wore indoors, and held her little head high, as if she quite meant to impress an idea of her dignity upon the Italian, who had to stoop down a long way, and perhaps did stoop down more than Aunt Milly and I saw to be exactly necessary. They went the length of the street together, quite unconscious of the critics behind them, and then separated, Mr. Luigi marching off at a very brisk pace, and Sara continuing her way home. We came up to her just as she reached her own door. She was certainly a very pretty creature, and looked so fresh and blooming in the morning air that I could not have scolded her a great deal, though I own I had a very good mind to do my best in that way, while we were walking behind. The moment she saw us she took guilt to herself. Her face glowed into the most

overpowering blush, and the little parasol in her hand fell out of her trembling fingers. But, of course, her spirit did not forsake her. She was not the person to yield to any such emergency.

"We have been walking after you for a long time," said dear Aunt Milly, in a voice which I have no doubt she supposed to be severe. "I should have called you to wait for us, had I not seen that you were otherwise engaged."

"Oh! then you saw Mr. Luigi, godmamma?" said Sara, quite innocently. "He says he thinks he has found out where the Countess Sermoneta is."

"The Countess Sermoneta! — oh, child, child, how can you speak so to me?" cried Aunt Milly. "I don't believe there is any such person in the world. I believe he only makes a fuss about a name, no one ever heard of, to cover his real designs, whatever they may be."

"Godmamma!" cried Sara, with a flash of fury; "perhaps it will be better to come indoors," cried the little wicked creature (as Aunt Milly calls her); "nobody, that I ever heard of, took away people's characters in the open street."

Aunt Milly went in quickly, shaking her head and deeply troubled. The renewal of this subject swept Sara's enormity out of her head. We followed, Sara bidding me precede her with a sort of affronted grandeur, which, I confess, was a little amusing to me. When we came into the dining-room, where Aunt Milly went first, the little girl confronted us

both, very ready to answer anything we had to say, and confute us to our faces. But much to Sara's surprise, and perhaps annoyance, Aunt Milly did not say a word on the subject. She shook her head again more energetically than ever. She was so much shaken on this one subject, that other matters evidently glided out of her mind, whenever she was recalled to this.

"No, no! depend upon it there's no Countess Sermoneta. I believed in it at first, naturally, as everybody else did. It may be a lady, but it isn't an Italian lady. No, no," said Aunt Milly, mournfully; "he knows better. He said nothing, you may be sure, about *her* to me."

At this moment Mr. Cresswell entered the room, and a little after the brougham came to the door. There was nothing more said on the subject. Sara saw them drive away, with a flutter of fear, I could see; but she need not have been afraid. Aunt Milly had returned into the consideration of her own mystery, which swallowed up Sara's. I do not think, for my own part, that I had very Christian feelings towards Mr. Luigi as I went home.

CHAPTER III.

For a few days after I was occupied entirely with our own affairs. We had promised to go to the Park to see that strange sister Sarah, who troubled Aunt Milly's mind so much; and we had, of course, to make some little preparations for going — more, indeed, than were very convenient at such a time, as you may very well suppose. However, Aunt Connor, who had not paid the last half year's interest, sent it just then, "all in a lump," as she said herself, "thinking it would do you more good;" as indeed it did, though perhaps poor Aunt Connor had other motives than that one for not sending it just when it was due. Harry was quite pleased at the thought of going to the Park. He got leave of absence for a few days; and, naturally, it was a satisfaction to him, after feeling that he had been obliged to keep his wife in the shade so long, to say that it was to my relations we were going. And what with all the preparations for his going away as well, I was so very busy that I got little leisure to think. It is very common to say what good opportunities for thought one has in working at one's needle — and it is very true so far as quiet, leisurely work is concerned; but when it happens to be making shirts and such things — and you know,

with most men, merely to *say* they are made at home is enough to make them feel as if they did not fit, — it is quite a different matter. I was too busy, both mind and fingers, to do much thinking; and that was far better for me than if I had found more leisure. I used to go up to Lizzie's room, which we called the nursery, and work there. Baby sat on the carpet, well protected with cushions, and furnished with things to play with. He was not very particular — his playthings were of a very humble and miscellaneous order; but I am sure he was as happy as a little king.

"And eh, isn't it grand that his birthday's come before the Captain gangs away? He'll, maybe, be back," said Lizzie, peering into my face with a sidelong look, "before another year."

"Hush!" said I, hastily; "but you must remember, Lizzie, to be particularly nice and tidy, and to look as if you were twenty, at least, when we go to the Park."

Here Lizzie drew herself up a little. "I've never been among a housefu' o' servants," said Lizzie, "that's true — but I've been wi' a leddy, and that suld learn folk manners better nor a' the flunkeys in the world. For Menico says, as well as I can understand him, that there's twa men-servants, and as mony maids as would fill a house. Eh, mem, wouldn't it be a great vexation to see a wheen idle folk aye in the road? Menico's no like a common man; there's no an article he canna do; but as for

just flunkeys to hand the plates and do about a house — eh, if it was me, I would think they werena men."

"But Miss Mortimer's man is not a flunkey; it was he who came with us in the omnibus," said I.

"Yon *gentleman?*" cried Lizzie, in great dismay. "I thought he was a minister; and eh, to think of *him* puttin' on fires and waitin' at the table! I would far sooner be a woman mysel'."

"And have you any objection to be a woman apart from that?" said I. "I did not think you had been so ambitious, Lizzie. What would *you* do if you were a man?"

Lizzie's colour rose, and her work fell from her hand. "I would gang to the wars with the Captain," cried the girl, "I would aye make a spring in before him where danger was. I would send word every day how he did, and what he was doing. I would stand by our ain flag if they hacked me in pieces. I wouldna let the Hielanders stay still, no a moment! — I would dash them down on the enemy wi' a' their bayonets, and cry 'Scotland and the Queen!' and if we were killed, wha's heeding! — it would be worth a man's while to die!"

This outburst was more than I could bear. I forgot to think it was only Lizzie, a woman and a child, that spoke. I put my hands over my eyes to shut out the prospect she brought before me, but only saw the picture all the clearer, as my hand, with all its warm pulses beating, shut out the day-

light. I could see Harry rushing before them with his sword drawn. I could hear his voice pealing out over their heads; I could see the smoke close over him and swallow him up. Ah, heaven! — pictures and stories are made out of such scenes. This creature by my side had flamed up into exulting enthusiasm at the thought. How many hearts attended those charging regiments, breaking against each other, heart upon heart! It came to my mind to wonder, suddenly, whether there might not be some young Russian woman, like me, imagining that fight. Her husband and my Harry might meet under those dreadful flags, — she and I, would not we meet, too, in our agony? I held out my arms to her with a cry of anguish — we were sisters, though *they* were foes.

When I looked up Lizzie was crying bitterly, partly with her own excitement, partly, because she saw how cruel her suggestion had been to me. She did not mean it so, poor child. Baby sat playing all the time among his cushions, crowing to himself over the bright-coloured ball he had found under his heap of toys. I thought to myself he would laugh all the same whatever happened, and wondered how I should bear to hear him. But that was enough, that was too much. I stopped myself, as best I could, from going on any further. I got some linen that had to be cut out, and rose up to do it; — it was very delicate work. If I were not very careful, a snip of the scissors, too much or too

little, might spoil all the stuff; for Harry was very fastidious, you know, about all his things, like most young men. It took some trouble to steady my hand enough — but I did manage it. I wonder what the Russian woman did, to calm *her* agitation down.

Lizzie recovered very hastily when she saw what I was doing. She picked up her work, and sewed for a long time so silently and swiftly, that the snip of my scissors and the movement of her arm, as she drew through her needle, were the only sounds, except those which baby made, to be heard in the room. At last she took courage to address me with great humility, asking only if it was "the day after the morn" that we were going to the Park?

I nodded my head in return, and Lizzie took courage to go on. The next question was whether the Italian gentleman would be there?

"The Italian gentleman! what has he to do with the Miss Mortimers?" cried I.

"Eh, it's no me said it," cried Lizzie, in alarm; "but yesterday, the day the leddy was here, Menico was a' the gate out there, ance errand wi' a letter. I said what way did it no go to the post? and he said the post wouldna do. But I wouldna let on the leddy was here."

"He went out with a letter, did he?" said I, in much surprise. "Was that where he was all day? I did not see him about till it was dark."

"There maun be another leddy?" said Lizzie,

inquisitively; "and he gaed her some grand name or another. He's awfu' funny wi' his names. He ca's baby *Signorino* and *ragazzino*, and I dinna ken a' what. I looked them up in the dictionary, and they were a' right meanings enough. But it wasna Miss Mortimer he ca'ed the other leddy. Eh, mem, isn't Menico getting grand at his English? and I'm aye improving mysel' too," said Lizzie, with a little blush and awkward droop of her head.

I was not much in the humour for laughing at poor Lizzie's self-complacency; but I was rather anxious to hear all the gossip I could get for Aunt Milly's sake. I asked immediately "Were they kind to Menico at the Park?"

Lizzie hesitated a little in her answer. "He's rael clever at speaking," she said, apologetically, — I suppose finding it rather hard to go back so soon after her laudation — "but when it's a long story it's no so easy to ken — no *a*' he means. But I'm no thinking they were very good to him — for he was awfu' angry when he came hame. And eh, to see him at his dinner! You would think he hadna seen meat for a week. It's no a guid account of a house — no meaning ony harm of a great house like the Park," said Lizzie, reflectively, — "when a man comes awfu' hungry hame."

Here there was a little pause while Lizzie threaded her needle. I don't know whether she was indulging in any melancholy anticipations of the

hospitality of the Park. However, presently she resumed her story again.

"And eh, mem! far mair than that," said Lizzie, making a fresh start, "he brought back the very same letter just as it was — it might be because the leddy was out, or I dinna ken what it might be; but I saw him gi'e it back to the gentleman. And the gentleman, instead of being angry, he just took the letter and shook his head, and set fire to it at the candle. The door was open, and I saw him do it as I came up the stairs. It gaed to my heart to see him burning the good letter," said Lizzie; "there was, maybe, something in't that somebody might have likit to hear."

"But, Lizzie, don't you know nobody has any business with a letter except the person who wrote it, and the person it is addressed to?" said I. I spoke, I confess, in an admonitory spirit. We did not get very many letters, but Harry was sadly careless of those he did get.

"Eh, but foreigners are no like other folk," cried Lizzie; "there's something awfu' queer in burning a letter, and it a' sealed up. I couldna find it in my heart; — and when it's a long story, it's awfu' fickle to understand Domenico, the half o' what he says."

Lizzie ended with a sigh of unsatisfied curiosity. Perhaps, if I could have done it, I might have been as anxious to cross-question Domenico as she.

CHAPTER IV.

Our little journey was arranged by Aunt Milly in the most comfortable way she could think of for us. Harry would not consent to let her send the carriage all the way. The railway was close to us, and it passed about two miles from the Park, where there was a little station; and the carriage was to meet us there. It was a very short journey, certainly; but I remember when we were all in the train, — all — every one of us, — a family entire and close together, — and especially at the moment when we were passing through the tunnel, and felt in the darkness more entirely separated from the world, — a sudden thought seized upon me: "Oh, if we were only going on, anywhere, anywhere to the end of the world!" Plunging through the darkness, with Harry sitting close by me, and baby on my knee, and nobody able to approach or stop us — going on all together! All sorts of people have their fancies, no doubt. I daresay mine were very homely ones; but I shall never forget the strange thrill that came upon my heart as this wild possibility seized me. When we came slowly into the daylight, and the train stopped, and the door of the carriage flew open, and dear Aunt Milly herself appeared to welcome us, I woke up with a little

shiver into real life again. Ah me! one cannot dart into the bowels of the earth and hide one's self. But life and duty somehow looked cold at me with their piercing daylight eyes after that thought.

Everything familiar stopped short and broke off when we got into the carriage. Aunt Milly was not a great lady. I don't think anything could ever have made her a great lady; but it was clear she had been a person of consideration many a year. I never had been in such a carriage before; indeed, I don't think I had ever been in any carriage but a public one, for, of course, Aunt Connor was not rich enough to have a carriage of her own. But when I sat down by Aunt Milly's side, I could not help feeling immediately that it all belonged to me. It was a strange feeling, and indeed, if nobody will be shocked, it was a very pleasant feeling. Instead of making me discontented, somehow it quite reconciled me to being poor. My own opinion is, that people of good family, or whatever is equivalent to good family, — people that know they belong to a higher class, whether other people know it or not, — always bear poverty best. It does not humiliate them as it does people who have always been poor. I think I could have stood any remarks upon my bonnet, or even baby's pelisse, with great equanimity after my visit to the Park; being poor looked so much more like an accidental circumstance after that. Perhaps I don't explain very well what I mean, so I will just state it plainly, and then you

may understand, or disagree with it, just as you choose. The higher one's rank is, the better one can bear being poor. There! it is not the common opinion, but I believe it all the same for that.

And here was the Park, the very same great modern house that stood (leaning on the trees) in poor papa's drawing, with two wings drawn out from the main body of the building, and a curious archway and little paved court at the side before you came to the great door. We went to the great door as we were strangers, and I could see the grave face of my omnibus acquaintance peeping through a round bow-window close to the door before he admitted us, very solemnly and with the profoundest abstract air. I wonder if he could remember us. His face looked as blankly respectful as if any idea on any subject whatever would somehow be unbecoming the dignity of the Park. Aunt Milly, who had gradually become fidgety, now took hold of my hand and drew me forward quickly. I went with her, a little astonished, but with no clear idea where I was going. She took me into a very long, very large room, with a great many tall windows on one side, a room so big as to look a perfect maze of furniture to me. I saw nobody in it, and did not think of it as being a room in common use. She had brought me to see some picture, no doubt. But Aunt Milly hurried me up this long room, with her hand upon my wrist, to a screen that seemed drawn so as to shelter one side of the fireplace. When we came in front of this, I

was greatly startled to see a lady, with large knitting pins in her hands, rise slowly from an arm-chair. There was nothing extraordinary in her look; she had fine features, I suppose, — I don't think I know, very well, what fine features are, — she had white hair, and a pretty cap with soft-coloured ribbons, and a strange, *studied*, soft-coloured dress. I noticed all this unconsciously, in the midst of the nervous and startled sensation I had in being brought in front of her so suddenly. She put both her knitting-pins into one hand, and held out the other to me. Then she bent forward a little, meaning me to kiss her, which I did with much awe and no great sensation of pleasure. Her hand was cold, and so was her cheek. I could scarcely help shrinking away from her touch. Then she spoke, and I, being quite unprepared for it, was still more startled. Her voice was a kind of whisper, very strange and unpleasant; all the s's came out sharp, with a kind of hiss. I suppose it was because she was so entirely used to it herself that Aunt Milly never mentioned it to me.

"So you are Richard Mortimer's daughter?" she said. "Sit down: I am very glad to see you. It is I that have been so anxious about finding you for some time past. But where is your husband? I want him to come as well as you."

"He is in the hall. He will be here presently, Sarah," said Aunt Milly. "I told Ellis to show him in, and the dear baby, too; but I could not

keep back Milly from you for a moment. I knew you would be anxious to see her at once."

"I wish to see her husband too," said Miss Mortimer. "So your name is Milly? Because it was our principal family name, I suppose? Your father was a great man for family matters, because *his* father was such a leveller; otherwise I should have thought he would have called you after me."

Why, I wondered? but indeed I had very little inclination to speak.

"I want to see your husband particularly. I should like you to live here. Milly says he is going to the Crimea," said Miss Mortimer. "I hope he's a reasonable man. Why shouldn't he leave the army at once? *I* want him here. You were not the heir to an estate like the Park when he got orders for the Crimea. I see no reason in the world why he should not sell out and stay at home."

I think she went on saying more, but I did not hear her; the great room swam in my eyes; she seemed all fading away into pale circles. I lost hold of the chair or something I was standing by. I don't remember anything else till I felt some water dashed on my face, and gradually the pale circles cleared away, and I was in the same room again. I had no idea what had happened to me. I was lying on a sofa, though, now, with my face all wet, and a dreadful singing and buzzing in my ears, and Harry was there. I found out I had fainted. I never did such a thing in all my life before; how very foolish

of me! and just when she was talking, too, about that — that chance. I caught hold of Harry's fingers tight: "Go and speak to her!" I cried out. I could not keep still until he went, for I could see the screen, and knew she was there.

When he disappeared behind the screen, and when, after a moment, Aunt Milly followed, always keeping her eyes on me, I lay perfectly still grasping my two hands in each other. My mind was all seething up, as if in a fever, round what she had said. I was conscious of nothing else. I could not hear what they were saying now for the noise in my ears; but as I lay still a strange succession of feelings came over me. It was like so many breezes of wind, each cooler, — nay, I mean colder, — than the other. First it occurred to me what other people would say of him, of Harry, whom no one now durst breathe a doubt upon; then I thought of him fighting with himself for my sake, trying to put down his manhood and his honour to save breaking his wife's heart; then I came to myself last of all. Would I? could I? I groaned aloud in my anguish. Oh, Russian woman, what would *you* say? There are plenty to be killed and sacrificed. Shall we let our children's fathers go, to be lost in that smoke and battle? Harry burst out to me from behind the screen when I was in this darkness. I never saw him look as he looked then. He took my two hands and cried out in an appeal and remonstrance, "Milly, do *you* say so?" looking down at me with

his eyes all in a blaze. I could not bear it. I put him away — thrust him away. They say I cried out to God in my despair. I can't tell anything that I said but "Go!" Oh, Russian woman, I wonder if you made up your mind as I did! No, not if it were to break my heart; we could die, all of us, when the good Lord pleased; but the good Lord never pleased that one of us should make the other fail.

CHAPTER V.

I FELT ill and shaken all the rest of that day. It was some time before they would let me get up from the sofa, and I quite remember how very strange it was to lie there in the great daylight room, with the sky looming in through the great window, and to watch, always so close by, and yet so distant, that screen which was drawn out by the side of the fire. I could not keep my eyes from that harmless piece of furniture. Aunt Milly kept coming and going, constantly talking to cheer me up, and bringing things to show me. But no sound came from the screen. There, in that little space, shut off and shaded out of the centre of her home, sat the woman who already fascinated me with an influence I could not explain. Without knowing what I was doing, — indeed, even I may say against my will, — strange recollections of stories I had read came up to my mind; about people in masks going whispering through an evil life, about the veiled prophet in the poem, about secret hidden creatures suspected of all manner of harm, but never found out, or betrayed. There she was, within three paces of me, concealed and silent, — or was it not rather watchful, lurking, with her bloodless smile and her shut-up heart? My imagination, perhaps,

is always too active; somehow it quite overpowered me that day. It seized upon Miss Sarah Mortimer's looks and her voice, and the strange separation which she made by that screen between herself and the world. She was different — entirely different — from that old ghastly Miss Mortimer whom I used to dream of in my grandfather's house: that one with her hair all mixed with grey, and her dark careless dress, sitting by the fire with the ghosts of the past about her, was a pleasant recollection in face of this. The great beauty, deserted of all the world and fallen into solitude, had something pathetic in her loneliness. But behind that screen there was no pathos that I could see; nothing human, I had almost said. What folly to speak so! To anybody's eyes but mine, I daresay there was only an old lady very prettily and carefully dressed, everything about her looking as if it were intended to repeat and reproduce the effect of her white hair; soft colours with clouds of something white coming over them. But I could not look at her in that way. I was in awe and afraid when I looked at the screen. It was a comfort to get out of the room, to go upstairs, where after a while Aunt Milly took me. But I could not forget her even upstairs. There she sat in her armchair, stony-eyed, knitting like one of the Fates, — or was it spin they did? — and that screen drawing a magical, dreadful shadow round her chair.

Aunt Milly had prepared our rooms for us with

the greatest care, that was very evident. There was the daintiest little bed for baby, all new and fresh, evidently bought for him, and quite a basketful of new toys, which already he was doing his best to pull all to pieces. Oh, such bright, luxurious rooms! I felt my heart grow a little cold as I looked at them. Neither Harry nor Aunt Milly had said a word to me on the subject. They thought they could deceive me, I suppose; but the moment I saw these apartments, don't you think I could see what they were planned out for? I was to be taken there when he went away.

"And, my dear, what do you think of your Aunt Sarah?" said her kind sister, looking rather wistfully into my face.

I was so foolish that I was half afraid to answer. How could I tell that our words were not heard behind the screen yonder? And as for meeting her eyes I could not have done that for the world.

"But you know she is not my Aunt Sarah," said I. "It is a love name, dear Aunt Milly. I — I don't know Miss Mortimer yet; you must let me keep it for you."

"Hush! you have not known me much longer!" cried Aunt Milly. "No such thing, child! we are both the same relation to you. Poor dear Sarah! I forgot to tell you about her voice. Isn't it very sad she should have lost her beautiful voice? She is very clever too, Milly," said Aunt Milly, with a

sigh. "When you know her better you will admire her very much."

"But you know she jilted poor papa," said I, trying to laugh and shake off my dread of the veiled woman downstairs.

"My dear! she jilted half the county!" said Aunt Milly, rather solemnly and not without a little pride. "Your Aunt Sarah was the greatest beauty that ever was seen when she was as young as you."

This speech made me smile in spite of myself. Dear Aunt Milly, perhaps, had been a little slighted by the county. She had no compunction about her sister's prowess. I don't know that I felt very sorry for her victims myself, even poor papa, I fear. But, ah me! what kind of a woman was this, I wonder, that had been an enchantress in her day! She was an enchantress still. She charmed me, as a serpent, I could suppose, might charm some poor creature. I wonder if there was any pity in her, any feeling that there was a God and a heaven, and not merely the century-old ceiling with the Mortimers' arms on it, over her where she sat? I don't believe she cared. I don't think there was anything in the world but her own will and inclination, whatever it might be, that ruled her in her dreadful solitude. I wonder when she looked across her knitting at such a human creature as Aunt Milly how she felt; whether it ever came into her head to wonder which of them was contrary to nature? But I don't suppose Miss Mortimer cared anything about nature. In

this wonderful world, all so throbbing with life and affection, I think she must have known nobody but herself.

Thinking like this, you may suppose I could not deceive Aunt Milly to make her think I admired her sister. I kept off speaking of her; which, of course, though not quite so unpleasant, tells one's mind clearly enough. Aunt Milly gave a little sigh.

"My dear, I see you don't take to Sarah just at once. I was in hopes if you had taken to each other she might, perhaps, have told you something of what is on her mind. Because, you know, after all we have heard, something must be on her mind, whether she shows it or not. I am afraid it is all beginning again now, Milly; but somehow she hasn't let her courage down as she did when that young man was about before. I suppose she's more prepared now. She drove out quite calm yesterday, just as usual; though Mr. Luigi's servant was out here with a letter the very day I saw his master at your house."

"So I heard," said I.

"So you heard! Dear! How did you hear? I know things spread in the most dreadful way," said Aunt Milly, in great distress; "but to think that should have reached Chester already! What did you hear?"

"I heard it only from Lizzie, my little maid,"

said I, pointing to the door of the other room. "Mr. Luigi's servant and she are great friends."

Aunt Milly followed the movement of my hand with her eyes, a little awe-stricken. "She must speak his language, for he knows no English," she said, with involuntary respect. "But, dear, dear, she's only a child! To be sure she'll go and publish it all in the servants' hall. But speaking of that, my dear, you ought to have a proper nurse. I felt very nervous about baby when I saw her carrying him. She may be big, you know, but she's only a child."

Here Lizzie, either because she had heard us, or by some sudden impulse of her own, knocked pretty loudly at the door. I went to it a little timidly, rather apprehensive that she had been listening, and meant to defend herself. I did Lizzie great injustice however. She was standing in a paroxysm of joyful impatience on the other side of the door. I don't believe the most injurious expression applied to herself could have reached Lizzie's ear at that moment. She had her great arms stretched out, stooping over little Harry. Her face was perfectly radiant and flushed with delight. On they came, baby tottering on his own little limbs, half triumphant, half terrified, Lizzie with her wings spread out, ready to snatch him up the moment he faltered. Anybody may imagine what I did. I dropped down on the floor and held out my arms to him, and forgot all my troubles for the moment. When he

came tottering into my arms, the touch of his little hands swept all the cares and sorrows out of the world. It was not for long. But a minute's joy is a wonderful cordial; it strengthens one's heart.

"And oh, mem!" cried Lizzie, lifting her apron to her eyes, "the Captain 'll see him afore he gangs away!"

"Go and fetch him," cried Aunt Milly, turning her out of the room. Aunt Milly was nearly as delighted as she was; but she saw it was hard upon me to be continually reminded that Harry was to be gone so soon. By way of putting it out of my mind, she began such a lecture upon the danger of letting babies walk too soon, and about weak ankles and bowed legs and all kinds of horrors, that I snatched my boy up on my knee, and was as much alarmed as I had been overjoyed. When Harry came, and found me half frightened to allow baby to exhibit his new accomplishment, and Aunt Milly doing her best to soften down her own declarations, and convince me that she referred to babies in general, and not to my boy, he burst into fits of laughter. I rather think he kissed us all round, Aunt Milly and all. He was in very high spirits that day. It did not occur to him what a struggle I had come through before I overcame Miss Mortimer's temptation; he was contented to think I had fainted from heat and excitement and all the fatigue I had been exposed to of late; and it was a comfort to him to have my real voluntary consent to his going away. Then this

was to be my home, and here was my dear kind friend beside me. His heart rose, he laughed out his amusement and pleasure with the freedom of a young man in the height of his strength and hope. The sound startled the unaccustomed walls. I saw Aunt Milly look at him with a kind of delighted surprise and pleasure. Youth had not been here for long. I wondered did manhood, after Harry's fashion of it, belong to the Mortimers at all? Many a day since, sitting in these silent rooms, the echo of Harry's laugh has come back to me ringing like silver bells. Ah, hush! we shall all laugh when he comes back.

But when Lizzie came to take her charge, the expression of the girl's face had completely changed. She took the child away with a certain frightened gravity that had a great effect upon me. Aunt Milly had left me by this time, and Harry had gone out to see the grounds, leaving me to rest. Resting was not very much in my way; of course I got up from the sofa the moment they were gone. What good would it do me, does anybody suppose, to lie there and murder myself with thinking? I went after Lizzie to ask her what was wrong. Lizzie was very slow to answer. There was "naething wrang; she wasna minding. The man in blacks had asked if she was the nurse or the nursery-maid. But it's no' my place to answer questions," said Lizzie, with indignation, "and thae English they're that saucy, they pretend they dinna ken what I'm saying. Eh,

I would just like to let them ken, leddies and gentlemen aye ken grand what I'm saying! but they've nae education: 'Menico says that himsel'."

"But what does 'Menico know about education, Lizzie?" said I.

Lizzie looked much affronted. "He mayna maybe ken *English*," she said, "but he may be a good scholar for a' that. The tither maids just gape and cry La! when he takes the dictionary, and laugh at every word he says. He says they've nae education, thae English. He's no' a common servant-man like that man in blacks. He kens a' the gentlemen's business and what he's wantin', and everything about it. Eh," cried Lizzie, opening her eyes wide, and glancing behind her with involuntary caution, "do you think yon would be *her?*"

"Who?" said I. Was it possible that Lizzie knew?

"Mem!" said Lizzie, with national unconscious skill and the deepest earnestness, "do you think there's ony witches in this country, like what there was lang syne?"

I was a little startled by the question; it brought back to my mind in an instant that extraordinary picture which had so great an effect on my own imagination, — the veiled woman at her knitting with the screen behind her chair.

"Or the Evil Eye," continued Lizzie, with a little gasp of visionary terror; "oh dinna say, if ye please, that I'm to bring *him* into yon muckle room!

for I would do some ill to the house, or her, or myself — and would be carried, and no ken what I was doing, if she put any of her cantrips upon our bairn!"

"Lizzie!" cried I, "child, you forget what you are saying, and where you are!"

"Oh no, no' me!" cried Lizzie with vehement tears in her eyes; "but, Mem, it maun be her; there's nae other leddy except our leddy in this house. And if I was never to say another word, she's no canny; I ken she's no canny, if it was only what Domenico says."

"In the name of wonder what does Domenico say?" cried I, driven to despair by the wild words in which there was no meaning. I don't believe she knew herself what the meaning was.

Lizzie stopped short and repeated, with a puzzled and troubled glance at me, "When it's a long story it's awfu' fickle to ken," she said, slowly; "but just that yon's the leddy. Eh, I dinna ken what they ca' her right, nor what ill-will they have at her; but 'Menico, he says — he says — Mem, you'll no be angry, it wasna *me*, — he says she's the deil himsel'."

"Lizzie," said I, in considerable agitation, "try to recollect; Miss Milly wants to know; what *does* Domenico say?"

Lizzie blushed, and made a long pause again. "You see it's the Dictionary, Mem," she said, with a sigh. "When he's tired looking up the words, he

just gi'es a great burst out in the Italian, and thinks he's explained it a'. It's awfu' fickle when it's a lang story; but just it's *her;* and eh! I'm sure she's no canny by what Domenico says."

I had to be content with this very unsatisfactory conclusion. It was all Lizzie could give me, — it was *her;* and she was a dreaded mysterious person against whom the Italian was struggling in vain. I felt a strange thrill of curiosity, deeply as my own mind was pre-occupied. Was it a melodrama or a tragedy I was about to be present at? The crisis, whatever it might be, could not be long delayed. What part were we to play in it? why did she want Harry to stay? I did not say anything either to him or Aunt Milly of Lizzie's communication or my own fancies; but it seemed to me somehow, when I passed through the rooms or along the passages that a certain tingling stillness, the pause before the storm, was closing round and round about the house.

CHAPTER VI.

"We were interrupted in our talk yesterday," said Aunt Milly, "but I have not forgotten what you said about your little maid. My dear, I don't think it is worth your while to warn her against talking about these matters. When they think a thing's important, they are all the more likely to talk."

"But you don't know Lizzie," said I.

"No," said Aunt Milly, doubtfully. "I always have heard the Scotch were faithful servants; but it's undeniable that they *do* love to talk. Besides, she's only a child. My dear, has she any particular claim upon you?"

"Only that she is an orphan," said I, "like Harry and me."

"Ah, dear child! there's two of you; it does not matter to you," cried Aunt Milly; then she continued, rather anxiously, "I'd like to know, however, what she can tell about this, Milly. Ellis told me a confused story about a foreign man coming with a letter, and that he insisted on seeing the lady — the lady! and couldn't talk no more sense, Ellis says. I understood by the description, it must be that man. There couldn't be two fat foreign serving-men in a quiet country like this; and Carson, 'as happened to

be in the hall at the moment,' Ellis tells me, spoke to him, 'and they arguifyed for long in a queer language,' and then he went away. I don't know any more of it, my dear. This Lizzie of yours, if she can understand that man, and he told her of it, I wonder does *she* know any more?"

Then I told her of the further particulars which had come under Lizzie's observation, the letter returned and destroyed. Aunt Milly once more grew a good deal excited. She walked about the room with a troubled face, and many exclamations; but on the whole it gave her comfort. "My dear, she can't be afraid of him now," said Aunt Milly; and with this piece of consolation she went away strengthened to her many businesses, for everything evidently is in her hands. That eldest sister of hers, whom I cannot call by any name of love, takes no share in anything. When she does talk, she talks as if she were the sole mistress and ruler of the house; but Aunt Milly, though I understand they are quite equal in their rights, has all the trouble. It is very strange, but I could not feel so comfortable about her sending back that letter as Aunt Milly did. To tell the plain truth, a very distinct suspicion had entered into my mind about her. It flashed upon me when Mr. Luigi was speaking of her, and it grew stonger and stronger every hour I spent in the same room, though how it could be, was more than by any amount of thinking I could divine. I will not say what my fancy was; I was always too

imaginative. I don't want to commit myself till I see whether anything will occur to bear me out.

The next day was wet, and I had abundant means of seeing Miss Mortimer. I think my foolish faint that first day had quite settled me in her opinion. She saw I was a nobody from that moment. Accordingly all that rainy afternoon I sat by her in the strangest unsocial way. The fire was still kept up, though the weather was warm; and Aunt Milly had stationed me in her own easy chair, opposite her sister, and commanding the entire length of the room so that I could see who entered at the door, though Miss Mortimer could neither see nor be seen by any one coming in. The five great windows were all very naked and bare, the curtains drawn back, and the blinds drawn up, according to Miss Mortimer's fancy; she had always an amount of twilight at her command by movement of her screen. These five long lines of cold broad light, the cloudy sky looking full down upon us, and the blasts of rain driving against the cold transparent fence of glass which separated us from that outdoor world, where the early flowers hung their heads in the rain, and the shrubs cowered and drew together in the fitful gusts of wind, gave an extraordinary atmosphere to the picture. Then that long great mirror at the end of the room repeated the five windows in strange perspective, and reflected all the maze of space and crowd of furniture in bars of light and shadow; while here, in the centre, played

the uncertain glow of the fire, much too warm, and making the air feel unnatural; and close before me sat Miss Mortimer with the screen carefully drawn round her chair. She had on her usual dress — her muslin scarf or shawl, I forget which, lined with pale blue silk, and ribbons of the same colour in her cap, and black lace mits upon her thin hands, which, when she happened to stop for a moment, she rubbed slowly before the fire. She did not talk to me. I understand it was very rarely she talked to any one. Silently, as if it were some weird work she was about, she knitted on; but sometimes, as I was conscious, lifted her eyes from her knitting, and continuing her work all the time, surveyed me as I sat helpless before her. Every time the door of the room happened to open she repeated this. I felt her stare at me, as she might have stared at a mirror, to see who had entered the room; and it is impossible to describe how I felt under that look. I durst not answer it by turning my eyes upon her; but looking past her at the door, as one naturally does when the door of the room opens — and knowing her gaze to be fixed on me, I faltered, I trembled, my face burned in spite of myself. This went on till, in desperation, I fairly answered her look; then my feelings changed. Those blue eyes, which must have paled and chilled with age, were gazing with a watchful dread in my face. It was not me she was looking at. Her hands went on, in their dreadful inhuman occupation, while she found

in my face a reflection of who it was that went in, or out, by that door behind her. It might be a habit she had got into; but I could read in her eyes that she sat there in full expectation of somebody or something arriving suddenly, which might startle and distress everybody else, but which *she* knew. Again, I saw the same contrast which I had seen between Aunt Milly and Mr. Luigi. This woman, like the Italian, was in no perplexity. She was not confused with a mystery she could not comprehend, as Aunt Milly was. She knew something was coming, and what was coming, and was prepared to defend herself, and hide her shame to the death.

Hide her shame! oh, how do I dare say it; how could I venture to say that she had disgraced herself, or even to think so? There she sat, clothed in a double respect, even by reason of all that made her so unlovely and distasteful to me, the real great lady of the house, served by everybody, imagining herself quite supreme; the head of the house, though she transferred all the trouble of it to other shoulders; Miss Mortimer, of the Park, a spotless maiden lady, who might have been, as the common story went, had she chosen to marry, almost of any rank she pleased. All that I knew; but as I gazed at her, the wild sudden fancy that had seized me before, grew stronger and stronger. A kind of loathing took possession of me. Shame may be dreadful, must be dreadful; but to deserve it, and yet to escape it —

to know one's self guilty, and fight all one's life against the penalty — to shut one's self up, heart and voice, like that in a corner, waiting for the discovery and exposure which has become inevitable — and resolute by every lie and expedient of falsehood to resist and baffle it — the sight was hideous to me. I turned away from her with a feeling of sickness — then in the impulse of the moment I spoke.

"Should not you like to take this seat, Miss Mortimer, if you wish to see who comes in at the door?"

"How do you know," she cried, in her strangled voice, "that I wish to see who comes in at the door?"

"I can see it in your eyes," said I. I could not help a little shudder as I spoke. Her only answer was to draw a little further back into the twilight of her screen. I don't think she looked at me again; but she did something else when Ellis came in the next time, which was quite as characteristic. She listened visibly, with an extraordinary intentness; her knitting stopped, though her eyes were bent on it. I could fancy she must have heard the very vibration of the man's foot upon the floor, and satisfied herself by its sound what it was.

"Miss Milly's compliments, ma'am, and will you please step into the library a moment," said Ellis to me.

"Who's in the library, eh?" interrupted Miss Mortimer, before I could speak.

Ellis faced round upon her slowly, with evident surprise: "I don't know as it's nobody, ma'am," said the man; "Miss Milly has something to show the young lady."

"Who's in the house? why don't you answer me? You are making up a story," cried Miss Mortimer, almost with a shriek.

"Nobody, as I knows on, but the Captain, as is in the stables, ma'am, looking at the colt," said Ellis, doggedly, "and Miss Milly, as is waiting in the library for the young lady, with some pictures to show to her, as it looked to me; nor likely to come neither on such a day."

Instead of resenting this speech as I supposed, Miss Mortimer smiled to herself with a slight nod. She gave a glance out from her screen at the blank of cloudy sky and the falling rain. It seemed to soothe her somehow. She relapsed back again, and resumed her knitting, without looking at or speaking to me. Did it relieve her to be told that nobody was likely to come on such a day? Could she imagine a spring shower was motive enough to keep the avenging truth away? I cannot tell. Who could tell? I might be wronging her cruelly to think of any avenger on his way. But I left the room, leaving her there with the blank clouds and rain, with the solitary gleam of the decaying fire, in the heavy silence and broad light of the vast room. She

was standing at bay, grim and desperate; but she could actually imagine that the fate which pursued her would be kept away by the April shower! I cannot express all the wonder, pity, and horror that came over my heart — such strange, strange, inconsequent blendings of the dreadful and the foolish were not in any philosophy of mine.

CHAPTER VII.

I FOUND Aunt Milly in the library with some miniatures spread out before her. She wanted to show them to me. I can't tell very well what had suggested this to her. She was kept indoors by the rain, and with this standing uneasiness in her mind. Aunt Milly naturally sought for some means of returning to a discussion of the subject that engaged all her thoughts. She made me sit down by her, and silently put one after another before me. I could see clearly enough what she meant. A certain family resemblance ran through them all, a resemblance which Aunt Milly herself had escaped, and of which I believe there was not a trace in my features. But one after another these portraits recalled to me the young Italian's face.

"I ought to tell you," said Aunt Milly in a tremulous tone, "what has occurred to my own mind. I have thought of it for some time, but it's so very unlikely that I never could allow myself to think it. I do believe he must be my father's son. Yes, you may well be surprised. I can't think anything else but that my father must have married and had a son, and Sarah somehow had bullied him into leaving the child behind, and we've been deceivers all this time, and the Park has never been ours."

"But, dear Aunt Milly," cried I, "with all these terrible thoughts, why don't you satisfy yourself. If you tell Miss Mortimer how much you have found out, she certainly cannot help clearing up the rest."

"Ah! but she *can* help it — she is not carried away by her feelings; she knows better than to be surprised or anything like that. I have asked her, and been none the better for it," cried Aunt Milly, "and the young man will not tell me either. Milly, hush! there is certainly some one at the door."

The door bell at the Park was a peculiar one— it had a solemn cathedral sort of sound that rolled through the whole house, and it was only used by strangers or visitors on ceremony. Both of us started violently when we heard it; it came upon our consultations like a sudden alarm of battle.

"It rains as bad as ever; on such a day who can ring the great bell at our door?" cried Aunt Milly. "God help us! if my father walked in at that door, I should not feel it was anything out of the way. Nothing would surprise me now."

I could not make her any answer. We both sat perfectly silent, waiting for what was to come. As if to heighten the excitement of the moment, the rain, which had been falling steadily all day, suddenly became violent, and dashed against the windows in torrents. Through all this we could hear the great door opened and the sound of voices. My thoughts travelled into the great vacant drawing-room where these sounds could not fail to reach Miss Mortimer

within her screen. What was she doing? Could she be sitting there still, dumb and desperate, listening but not looking, with a pride and resistance more dreadful in its self-control than the wildest passions! I trembled with suspense and wondering anxiety in spite of myself. As for Aunt Milly, the miniatures she was looking at fell out of her hands. She covered her eyes for an instant, and then lifted her scared and pallid face to the door, as if she could hear the approaching sounds better, for having her eyes fixed that way. There was a pause that I suppose did not endure a minute, but which looked like an hour. Then a soft tap at the door; then Ellis entered, looking half as pale and anxious as we did — vaguely frightened he could not tell how.

"Miss Milly," he said, in a hasty troubled voice, "the gentleman is here as wants Miss Mortimer; what am I to do?"

The old mistress and the old servant looked at each other. The man did not know anything, but he knew the involuntary suspicion and dread that had somehow gathered about the house.

"What are we to do? God help us, Ellis, I know no more than the baby!" cried Aunt Milly under her breath.

She was carried by her excitement beyond all her usual discretion. I interposed as I best could.

"Let it come to the crisis!" cried I, not being well aware what I said; "it must be best to know

clearly, Aunt Milly — hush! — recollect, you know nothing — let him go in."

She made a convulsive pause and restrained herself; and then the usual keeping up of appearances recurred to her mind. "My sister's voice! you know, Milly," she said, turning to me as if with a kind of apology, — "who — who is it, Ellis?"

"It's — it's the foreign gentleman, ma'am," said Ellis, with a sympathetic faltering of his voice.

"Then show him in to Miss Mortimer!" cried Aunt Milly with a gasp over the words. "You shouldn't have spoken so, my dear," she said as soon as he was gone, "servants have nothing to do with our private affairs. Dear, dear, it's surely very cold. It's the storm come on so suddenly — a hailstorm, I declare. Don't you feel, Milly, how cold the air has grown?" I made no answer, and she did not expect any. She went up close to the library door, and stood there as if listening, shivering now and then with the nervous chill of her own emotion. We heard the drawing-room door open and shut, — then silence, silence, something positive, not merely an absence of sound. I stood by the table trembling, fancying I saw the stranger pass, as if through a picture, up that empty-seeming room, with the cold chill daylight spying in, and the motionless, conscious creature who feared and yet defied him lurking behind that screen. Would she speak to him? If she did it would not be with that stifled whispering voice. What communication would pass between

them? Would the old walls groan with some dark secret fatal to their honour? The very air tingled round us in the dead calm of the house. Surely it never was so noiseless before. As for Aunt Milly, she stood before me shivering at the door, sometimes putting her hand upon the lock, then drawing back in irresolute terror. This lasted for some time, though most likely for not half so long as I imagined it did; then she turned to me, wringing her hands and bursting out into tears and cries. "I cannot leave her alone any longer, Milly," she said in broken words. "I cannot desert her in time of need;" and made as though she would leave the room, and then returned and sank into a chair and hid her face in her hands. She was entirely overwhelmed and broken down. All I could do for her, was to get a shawl which hung over the sofa, and wrap it round her. All this had been too much for her strength.

In the midst of our suspense, Harry came suddenly in upon us. The sound of his honest frank step ringing into the library, startled me back to life again, and even Aunt Milly lifted up her blanched face expecting him to bring some news. Harry looked startled and curious, and did not grow less so as he looked at our agitated faces. "What is the matter, Milly?" he cried. "I passed the drawing-room windows just now, and looked in thinking to see you. Miss Mortimer was standing at a table looking over some papers, and by her side was Luigi, talking very earnestly. By Jove! to see them

standing there you would have said they were mother and son."

At these words Aunt Milly lifted up her head, listening, — but Harry's expression did not seem to strike her; she held up her finger and cried "Hark!"

The silence was broken. A bell evidently rung — a door hastily opened — startled us all three standing together. "Shall Harry go after him?" cried I, seeing how it was and pointing Harry to the door; but Aunt Milly would not, or perhaps could not, suppose that the visitor was merely going away. She sprang up, crying, "She must be ill!" and rushed out of the library. I followed her, alarmed, but not for Miss Mortimer. I saw Luigi standing at the open door, just about to go out into the cold rainy world out of doors, but Aunt Milly did not see him. She rushed forward blindly into the room where she supposed her sister to be ill.

When I rushed in after her I found the usual positions of the two ladies much reversed. Miss Mortimer was standing between the fire and the window, looking at her sister with a certain fierce scorn. Aunt Milly had sunk down in utter exhaustion and bewilderment upon a large low ottoman. The two were looking at each other, Aunt Milly all trembling, pallid, and anxious. Miss Mortimer, with her head more erect than usual, her muslin mantle hanging back from her shoulders, her attitude very rigid and exact, and no symptom of

excitement about her, save in the slight hurried incessant movement of her head and hands. A mere spectator would have said she was the judge and the other the culprit. It was an extraordinary scene.

"What did he say? Who is he? What does he want? Sarah, tell me for the love of heaven," cried Aunt Milly in her agony of distress and terror.

"Who is *he?* I am not a girl to distinguish any one person by that name," said Miss Mortimer. Then she went back steadily to her chair, and sat down in it and took up her knitting. "Any one who thinks to surprise me into speaking of my private affairs, is mistaken," she said after a while. "Gossips like you may talk as they please; but what belongs to me is mine, and nobody in the world has a right to ask what I either do or say."

That was all. She never opened her lips again that day. She sat there rigid, pretending to work; she did not work however. I noticed that to keep her hands and her head from excessive trembling was almost more than she was able for; but the day passed without any disclosure. I believe now she would die sooner than make any sign.

CHAPTER VIII.

That was a very miserable day. I cannot fancy a more uncomfortable position for a stranger than that of being thrust into some distressing family secret, almost immediately after his or her introduction to the family in which it exists. This was just what had happened to me. I was kept one way or other between those two sisters all the day. Aunt Milly kept continually appealing to me with her eyes, for conversation would not keep up its fluctuating and feeble existence in presence of that figure within the shelter of the screen; and my unlucky position of confidant must have been so apparent that I should not have wondered at any degree of dislike or displeasure which Miss Mortimer could have shown me. She did not show any, however; I could discern no signs of aversion to me. What am I saying? I could discern no signs of any human feeling whatever in her appearance and behaviour that day. My impression was that the sole thing with which her mind was occupied, was the effort to keep her head steady, and overcome the nervous, tremulous motion which agitated her frame. It was a relic, it might be an evidence, of some unseen tempest. But I am firmly convinced that this was the subject of all her thoughts. I watched, I must

confess, with intense curiosity, though as quietly as possible, that she might not see I was watching her, every movement she made. But she did not notice me; she scarcely noticed anybody; she was careless of what other people were thinking; what she laboured after, all that miserable, lingering, rainy night was to get the command of herself. She never ventured to unbend her attitude in the slightest degree. She set her teeth together sometimes, and made her face look ghastly; but she could not keep down that external symptom of the trouble or tempest within. Her head kept moving with an incessant tremble; her hands were too much agitated to pursue their work. She kept the knitting-pins in her fingers, and held them rigidly together, as if she were knitting, and sometimes made a few convulsive stitches, and dropt them again, and bent in a tragical dismal confusion over that trifling occupation of hers, which had grown so weird an adjunct of herself to me. I watched her with a certain horror and pity which I cannot describe. It was not her paltry wealth and lands she was defending; it was her honour and her life. There she sat a solitary desperate creature driven to bay, with dear Aunt Milly's vague terrors and anxieties revolving about her; but conscious in herself of a misery and danger far transcending anything in her innocent sister's thoughts. Life and honour! but I believed there was no way in this world to defend them but by unnatural falsehood, cruelty, and wrong, and that she did not shrink from

these means of upholding herself. Perhaps even a virtuous struggle would have exercised less fascination, than the sight of that desperate guilty secret resistance. I could not keep my eyes from Miss Mortimer. There was something terrible to me in her convulsive efforts after stillness, and in the nervous motion which continually betrayed her, and which no exertions on her part could overcome.

But she sat out all the lengthy lingering hours of that evening, after dinner, for they departed from their usual customs at that time, and dined late out of compliment to Harry. We did try to talk a little, but Aunt Milly's thoughts were all astray upon one subject, and she was continually breaking off in abrupt conclusions which irresistibly suggested the engrossing matter which she dared not enter upon. Miss Mortimer, meanwhile, attempted to read her "Times;" but whether it was that the rustle of the paper betrayed the trembling of her hands, or that her mind was unfit for reading anything, she soon laid the paper by, and resumed her pretence of working. You may suppose that Harry and I were not very much at our ease in this strange position of affairs. Almost everything that was said among us suggested a something which could not be said, yet which occupied everybody's thoughts. Aunt Milly sat flushed and troubled opposite to her sister; her distressed perplexed look, the look of one totally at a loss and unable to offer any explanation even to herself; her glances, sometimes directing me to look

at Miss Mortimer, sometimes appealing to me in vain for some suggestion which could throw light upon the subject, were enough of themselves to betray to any stranger the existence of some secret unhappiness in the house. Harry, who was not so much in Aunt Milly's confidence as I was, kept appealing to me on the other side. What was it all about? I never wished so fervently for the conclusion of a day as I did for that; and yet there must be some extraordinary fascination in watching one's fellow-creatures. I should not like to get fairly into that dreadful inhuman occupation which people called studying character. But I was so curious about Miss Mortimer that I could almost have liked to follow her to her own room, and watch, when she was no longer on her guard against other people, how she would look and what she would do. Would she faint, or cry out, or dash herself against the floor? or was she so accustomed to that dreadful secresy that she would not betray herself even to herself? She must have lived that dreadful hidden life, and locked up all she knew in her own breast for a lifetime; for a longer lifetime than mine.

"I wonder," said Henry, when we were alone that evening, "what sort of a person this Miss Mortimer is. Something's wrong clearly. I suspect there must be something in the old lady's life which will not bear the light of day."

"What makes you think so?" said I.

"The t'other old lady and you play into each

other's hands," cried Harry; "you know more about it than you choose to tell. But of course you are right enough if it is somebody else's secret; only recollect, Milly; I am very glad you should be an heiress; I am extremely glad you will have a house to receive you while I am away, and that, come what may, *that* little beggar is provided for; but look here, if there's another relation nearer than you, legitimate or illegitimate, I won't stand by and see him wronged."

"Harry, tell me what you mean," cried I.

Harry looked at me a little indignantly; he thought I knew more than he did, and was trifling with him. "Milly, who is that fellow Luigi?" he said at last.

"I make dreadful guesses," said I, "but I cannot tell. Aunt Milly knows nothing about him. The only idea she can form is that he may be her father's son."

Harry gave a long, half amazed, incredulous whistle, and turned away. He could scarcely believe me. Then I told him all I had heard, and something of what I had guessed. We did not converse plainly about this guess, which he had evidently jumped at as well as myself. A secret held with such dreadful tenacity was not a thing to be lightly discussed; but we both felt the same on the subject, only Harry's mind took a more charitable view of it than I did. They say *we* are always harder on guilty women than men are; perhaps it is natural. I

felt an abhorrence rise within me which I could neither overcome nor disguise at the idea of a woman, and especially a woman in such a position as Miss Mortimer, having lived a pretended life of honour and innocence all these years, with that guilt in her mind which nobody knew but she; and now of her sacrificing and disowning nature to keep up that dreadful sham. I can understand people meeting death rather than disgrace; that is, I mean I could understand how one would rather hear that those whom one loves should die than disgrace themselves; but I don't understand an insane struggle against the disgrace which one has deserved. That is not a noble struggle, so far as I can see; the only way of existing through such dreadful circumstances would be by enduring it; and all the same whether it was a woman or a man. I do think it is a shame to speak as some people speak on this subject, as if the *disgrace* were all; as if all the harm was not done when the wrong was done, whether disgrace came or no!

"I'll tell you what, Milly," said Harry, "I must say I think it's very hard the poor old lady should lose her good name for something that happened an age ago. No doubt, by what we saw to-day, she must have set her poor old heart upon resisting and denying it, as foolish people always try to do. Now, you know, that's evidently of no use. Of course a mere statement of any such claim having been made, is enough to finish Miss Mortimer, with all the gossips

of the county, whether it was proved or not. Now I shan't be here for long, and as they seem disposed to be so very kind to you ——"

"Don't, Harry!"

"But I must," said he. "It will be no end of consolation to me to think of you in these pretty rooms which Miss Milly has already prepared for you. If I can do them a good turn before I go, I will, you may depend upon it. As soon as we return to Chester I'll see Luigi; and if it can be got out of him what he wants, I shall certainly make an effort to have him satisfied, and Miss Mortimer left unmolested. It would not do if sins of thirty years standing were to be brought against people in this way. Why, anybody might be thrown into sudden shame on such a principle; and you women, you know, are so vindictive and all that ——"

"Oh, yes! I know," said I, "and will always be vindictive all the same. Imagine this woman standing side by side with Aunt Milly, and considered as spotless as she; imagine such a long cruel abominable sin, and no retribution overtaking it! Oh, you may be pitiful if you like, but it disgusts me."

Harry laughed. "I should be surprised if it did not disgust you, Milly darling," he said; "but poetic justice is exploded now-a-days. I don't suppose Luigi can be very anxious for her personal affection, considering how she seems to have behaved; and, indeed, to be sure he would be fully more disgraced than she. How many days are we to be

here? I shall see him whenever we return to Chester."

"Three days longer," said I, with a sigh. Somehow this little visit to the Park had come to look like a little barrier between me and what was coming. Presently we should go back to Chester, and then ——

Harry understood my sigh. He repeated the very words I was saying in my mind. "And then —" said Harry, "and then, darling, to see which of us two is bravest! But it will come hardest upon you, my poor little wife."

"Harry," cried I, "don't speak!" and I went away, and would have no more of such talk. It was enough that it was coming; it would be enough when it came.

Perhaps the last few words of this conversation were not the best preparation possible for sleep. I know I awoke a great many times during that long dark night, and once in its deepest darkness and stillness I fancied I heard a groan faintly sounding through the wall. Miss Mortimer's rooms were near ours. This sound set all my imagination busy again. It was she who groaned under that veil of night. She, so dreadfully on her guard all day long, who relieved her miserable heart thus when nobody watched her. It was impossible not to feel excited in the neighbourhood of such mysterious secresy. The sound of that groan moved me to pity; — she had not escaped without retribution. Was not that

dread of the consequences under which she was suffering, worse than the very hardest shape the consequences were likely to assume, if they themselves ever overtook the sinner?

CHAPTER IX.

The next day began much like the previous day; it was still showery and damp; and though Harry was out of doors I was prevented, by Aunt Milly's care, from joining him. In the afternoon we were to go out with her on a round of inspection to see the neighbourhood, Miss Mortimer having volunteered to give up the carriage to us for that purpose, though it was the day on which she generally took her drive; and the rector and some other near neighbours were to come to dinner in the evening. I was once more alone with Miss Mortimer. We sat much as we had done on the previous day, opposite each other, the moments passing over us in a certain excited silence. She did not say anything to me; she did not even look at me. She showed none of that voiceless anxiety to know who had come in when the door opened, which struck me before. She was much calmed down; the person she expected had come; the blow, whatever it was, had been borne; and for the present moment there was an end of it. She actually knitted her pattern correctly, and counted her stitches, and referred to her book to see if she was correct, as she sat before me there in her inhuman calm. Was she a creature of flesh and blood, after all? or a witch, like those

of the old stories, without any human motives in her heart of stone?

I could not help thinking so as I sat beside her. Her head still trembled slightly; but I suppose that was an habitual motion. She sat there shut up in herself, — her misery and her relief, and the cold dauntless spirit that must have risen from that smart encounter yesterday, and gained strength by the very struggle — hidden from everybody round her, as if they had been a world away. I gazed and wondered, almost trembled, at that extraordinary death in life. She who had all the tumult of passion and guilt in her memory; she who must have entered into the fullest excitement of life, and got entangled in its most dreadful perplexities; she who was no ascetic, nor even pretended to that rival excitement of the devotee which might have replaced the other; how could she have lived silent and obdurate through those dreadful years? The very thought of them struck me aghast. After her life of flattery, admiration, and universal homage; after her experience, whatever that might be, of more personal passions, to drop for a longer time than my whole life behind that screen into that chair! As I sat opposite to her, my thoughts turned back to that other Miss Mortimer, whom I had placed in imagination in my grandfather's house. Once more I thought I could see that large low room which I never had seen, except in fancy, with the ancient beauty sitting silent by the fire amid the ghosts of the past. Was

this the true impersonation of that dream of mine? Was this the Miss Mortimer, with her foreign count, whom Mrs. Saltoun remembered? As this recurred to me I could scarcely help a little start of quickened curiosity and eagerness. It seemed to flicker before me as a possible interpretation of all this dark enigma, could only the connecting link be found. As I was wandering deeper and deeper into these thoughts — so deep as to forget the strange position I stood in, and the possibility of being taken for a kind of domestic spy, which had embarrassed me at first — I heard a little commotion outside. The door, perhaps, was ajar, or it might be simply that my ears were quickened by hearing a little cry from baby, and Lizzie's voice belligerent and full of determination. I got up hastily and went to the door. I don't think Miss Mortimer even lifted her eyes to notice my movement. It was certainly Lizzie in some conflict with one of the authorities of the house; and Lizzie, as the natural and primitive method of asserting her own way, had unconsciously elevated her voice; a proceeding which alarmed baby, and also, as it appeared, her antagonist. I ran and threw the door open as I heard another little cry from my boy. There, outside, was a curious scene. Lizzie, in her out-of-doors dress, just returned from a walk in the garden with baby, with her face a little flushed, and her plentiful hair somewhat blown about by the wind, was resolutely pressing forward to enter the drawing-room, where, to be

sure, she had no business to come; while holding her back by her cloak, and whispering threats and dissuasions, was a person whom I had scarcely seen before, but whom I knew at once to be Carson, Miss Mortimer's maid. Lizzie was greatly excited; and what with managing baby and resisting this woman, while at the same time possessed with some mission which she was evidently determined to perform, looked fatigued and exhausted too.

"But I *will*," cried Lizzie, with her eyes flashing. "I'm no heeding about whether it's my place or no. I promised I would gi'e it into her ain very hand; and do ye think I'm gaun back o' my word? I tell ye I *will* gie't to the leddy mysel'. Eh, mem!" she exclaimed, breathlessly, with a sudden change of her tone as she saw me, "I met 'Menico at the gate, and I promised to gi'e it into the leddy's ain hand."

When I approached, Carson fell back; she shrank, I could fancy, from meeting my eyes. Her hand dropped from Lizzie's cloak; she was as much afraid to be supposed to interfere as she was anxious to interfere in reality.

"My missis's nerves, ma'am," said Carson, glibly, but in a half whisper, "is not as strong as might be wished. If the young person, ma'am, would give it to me, or —. You see the ladies at the Park they're known for charity, and beggars' letters, or such like, they're too excitin' for my missis; they puts her all in a tremble — it's on her nerves."

"But, mem," cried Lizzie, "I canna go back o' my word."

I stood between them, much perplexed and bewildered. The anxiety of Miss Mortimer's maid was evident; and Lizzie, from whose arms baby had instantly struggled as soon as he saw me, was greatly excited. At this moment she produced the letter which was in question. Carson made a stealthy spring to seize it, but recollecting herself, drew back, and looked up guilty, but deprecating, in my face. I don't know whether it was a desire to clear up the mystery, or the cruel curiosity of an observer of character that decided me. I dismissed Carson coldly, saying I would ring if Miss Mortimer wanted her, and told Lizzie to follow me into the room. Lizzie's excitement sank into awe as she trod softly through this great, faded, magnificent apartment. Before she reached the screen which sheltered Miss Mortimer, she was almost speechless with half-superstitious reverence. I am sure she would willingly have given her letter to Carson or anybody at that moment. The very fact that the person she was about to confront was thus concealed from her overawed her simple mind. When she actually emerged from behind the screen, and came in full sight of Miss Mortimer, Lizzie's healthful face was perfectly colourless, and her frame trembling. The supreme awkwardness of the attitude into which she fell, the spasmodic rudeness with which she thrust out that hand that contained the letter, the fright and consternation

visible in every twist of her person, would have been painfully ludicrous if there had been any time to observe it. Miss Mortimer raised her eyes and stared at the strange figure before her. Almost absurd as that figure was in its dismay and terror, her mind was not sufficiently at ease to be simply surprised. Any strange apparition had a right to appear before this woman in her intrenchments of dumb resistance. As I stood by looking on, I could understand the feeling which worked in her eyes. She was not surprised. No miracle could have surprised her. She was rather asking in her heart, "Who is this new assailant? Who will come next?"

"If ye please, it's a letter," said Lizzie, in a tremulous voice.

Miss Mortimer made no attempt to take the letter. She said, "Who are you?" with a strange curiosity; as if, amid all the powers that had a secret right to assail her in her conscious guiltiness, this was a new hobgoblin whom she could not well connect with the others. If there were any purgatory, I could fancy a poor soul there asking in the same tone the name of the new imp who came to torment it.

This was more than Lizzie could bear. I don't know what perplexed terrors and superstitious ideas of evil influence brought back the blood to her cheeks. She trembled all over under that eye, which had suggested the idea of the Evil Eye to Lizzie, and to which she was determined never to expose "our bairn." She must have endured a kind of

martyrdom as she stood under its steady gaze. "Eh, me? I'm no onybody," cried Lizzie, shivering with excitement; "it's just a letter. I said I would gi'e it into the leddy's own hand."

Miss Mortimer turned upon me — on the child — on the very mirror on the further wall, a look of silent defiance; she seemed to look round to call upon the very apartment in which we sat to witness what she did. Then she took the letter from Lizzie's rigid fingers, and with scarcely a motion, except of her hand, dropped it into the fire. After she had done it, she turned again to us with another steady look, and even with a smile; triumphant! — with a certain gleam of devilish satisfaction in her success, as if she had baffled us all once more. But in that very moment, while she still smiled, I could see her hold herself fast between the arms of her chair, to keep down the nervous tremor which seized her. That resisting, defying spirit was lodged in nothing stronger than a human frame. Her head shook, steadied, trembled again, with a force beyond all her power of control. With all that soul of successful evil in her face, her head shook as if with the palsy of extreme old age, and in spite of the most convulsive continuous efforts to keep it still. I was nearly as much awe-struck as Lizzie. I stole out of sight of her as the girl did. Never was there such a picture! She could conquer nature, truth, and every human feeling; but she could not conquer those tremulous chords and threads of mortal flesh which

refused to be in the conspiracy. She sat there dumbly defying every scrutiny, but with the smile growing fixed and ghastly on her face as she tried, with her utmost desperate feeble strength, and failed, to defy and overcome herself.

I asked Lizzie no questions as she came upstairs after me. I did not say anything to her when I heard her sobbing out her agitation in her own room. There was not a word said between us when she came refreshed by that little ebullition, and by the necessary arrangement of her wind-blown hair and dress, to take charge of little Harry. When I had given the child up to her, I went downstairs again, quite silent and eager. You may very well ask why. I cannot defend myself. I went down with no better motive than to watch Miss Mortimer, and see if anything more could be found out.

When I went into the room I saw nobody, but heard some voices and movement behind the screen. I believe if Miss Mortimer had been speaking in the ordinary human voice, I should not have heard her at that distance; but I did hear that strange stifled whisper almost as well as if it had been hissed into my ear.

"I must deny, deny, deny," said the strange voice. "Don't speak to me, you know nothing about it. It is the only strength I have."

"But oh! dear, dear, such a pretty young gentleman!" said the other speaker, in a tone of weeping but hopeless remonstrance.

"Let him prove his rights," said Miss Mortimer.

I obeyed my instincts, and fled out of the room as I heard that she was stirring behind the screen. And I had not been mistaken in the guess I made. She came out a few minutes later, leaning on Carson's arm, leaning heavily, with her head trembling like that of a palsied person; but her eyes full of that dreadful self-possession, knowledge and resistance. I trembled, too, as I stood aside to let her pass. She did not say anything, though she stared hard at me. The maid, though she did her best to make up her usual face when she saw me there, was evidently overpowered with anxiety and distress.

There was, then, one other individual who knew that secret — one creature who loved that dreadful old woman, and in whom she trusted. I could not help standing still to look after them as they went upstairs. Carson was very little younger than her mistress. She had a naturally anxious look, as well she might if she had been for years the depository of this secret. I could not help picturing their life to myself as they went upstairs: the innocent woman troubled and tearful, the guilty woman calm and immovable, but for that trembling of her frame which even her remorseless will was not strong enough to subdue. I could understand better now how she kept alive, and could preserve that frightful stillness of hers. Upstairs, in their own apartments, no doubt another life went on; a life of recollections and

schemes which no one knew of, a life palpitating full of those past years of which Miss Mortimer gave no sign. That was how she kept herself alive. I could not do anything but stand still, watching them, as they went slowly up to that retirement, where the mask could be laid off and the veil drawn. When they were out of sight, I strayed into the great vacant drawing-room, unable to withdraw my thoughts from that strange pair. "I must deny, deny, deny!" That was the position she had taken. Could any one in existence — could Luigi, a sensitive and high-minded young man as he seemed to be — seek motherly love from such a woman as this? Motherly love! it was dreadful even in thought to apply such words to anything that could come from her. Shame only, shame to both. What motive could he have to go on seeking her? for Nature had evidently no place in her heart of stone.

CHAPTER X.

"But, dear, dear, where's Sarah?" cried Aunt Milly, when some time later she came into the room.

I felt almost as guilty as if I had suddenly got some share in Miss Mortimer's secret. "She was going upstairs when I came in," said I; but I could not find it in my heart to say what new accident had done this.

Aunt Milly looked at her chair and her footstool, and the work-basket she had left behind, as if she might possibly ascertain something from them. "My dear, it will be well to avoid strangers to-night," she said, nodding her head, as if this conclusion was, on the whole, not unsatisfactory; "and, indeed, Milly, though you may think it strange of me to say so, I am not sorry; for Miss Kate, I am afraid, would be very likely to mention something about that poor young man, whoever he may be!" said Aunt Milly, with a sigh. "Dear, dear, to think what troubles people make, both for themselves and others, that might be avoided by a little openness. Why couldn't he have told me, my dear? If he has claims, I'd have seen him satisfied to the very last farthing, Milly! and if he hasn't claims, why should he persecute Sarah and me?"

"But it might be something he couldn't tell," said I, rashly.

"Something he couldn't tell? What do you mean, child? What sort of a connection could he have with our family that he *couldn't tell?*" cried Miss Milly. "I see what you mean. He might be a natural son. Harry has put that into your head, now, for I am sure you never could have thought of it of yourself. Milly, Milly, it's dreadful to say, but I'd be more thankful than I can tell you, to know that he was. I shouldn't forget he was my father's son all the same; he should be amply provided for — *amply*, my dear; ah, but it's far too good news to be true; and, besides, what would Sarah care for him, if he were illegitimate? It could not hurt us in the least. Nothing, but what would be an injury to us, can explain Sarah's looks. Don't let us think of it any more, Milly. Come and show me, dear, what you're going to wear to-night. I should like you to look pretty, though they are all old people; for they're old *friends* as well. Come upstairs with me, and show me what you are to have on."

I went, not without some trepidation, for I did not know what Aunt Milly would say when she knew I had nothing but white muslin. She did shake her head when she saw it spread out ready to put on. She even faltered forth some half questions as to what I had in my wardrobe, whether I had not a nice ——; but there dear Aunt Milly stopped. She would not hurt my feelings whatever I might wear;

and I don't deny I felt a little mortified myself to see it laid out like a little girl's best frock. However, I am thankful to say Harry never had an idea that it was not the very best thing I could wear.

"There are some lace flounces," said Aunt Milly, half to herself, eyeing the poor white frock over again, "that might brighten it up a little;" then she turned round suddenly and kissed me by way of apology. "My dear, don't be affronted, I'm sure you will look very pretty in it; — only I should have preferred, just for this one night, — but, to be sure, you never thought of bringing out all your things for such a short visit, and us such quiet people. Never mind, Milly dear, it will look very nice, I am sure. I have a very pretty scarf you shall wear thrown over it; it may not be quite in the fashion; but fine lace never goes out of fashion, you know. I meant to give it you anyhow; and here's a little jewel-box, with some ornaments in it; I used to wear them myself when I was a girl, and I had them reset just for a little remembrance of this visit. Put them on, for my sake, to-night; and remember, dear, that what we've been talking about so much these few days is a family secret. If anybody should say anything that seems to touch on it, or should even mention Mr. Luigi's name, don't look as if you were conscious of anything. It *may* come to nothing, you know. I am very glad you like them, my dear. I am quite pleased I thought of it. But recollect, Milly, my love, to be on your guard."

With these words she left me, running away from my thanks for her present. I was very much pleased with her present, and even at that moment, when people might suppose I had more serious things to think of, I must say it did give me a flutter of gratification to find bracelets in the jewel-box. How kind and thoughtful it was of Aunt Milly! I wonder if she knew I hadn't any? I showed them to Lizzie, who thought anything so grand had never been seen, and to baby, who would have liked to have them to play with, and finally to Harry when he came in, and I had to prepare for our drive. Harry found some fault (of course) with their style, but was quite as pleased as I was. And, indeed, it was very good of him to be pleased, for I had almost to go down on my knees to him to keep him from buying me something of the kind when we came to Chester, and he naturally grudged that any one should give them to me but himself.

To think of me saying so much about such a small affair as bracelets, when things so much more important were surrounding us on every side! I am afraid to say it, but it is true, that when I went down into the drawing-room that evening I was thinking too much about my beautiful scarf and these same bracelets to notice, at the first moment, who was there. The first thing that brought me to myself was hearing the voice of Miss Mortimer behind her screen. I was so amazed that, instinctively, without giving any reason to myself for it, I pushed

forward to see her. There she sat, that dreadful, wonderful witch of a woman — so far from being moved by any feeling of nature which might have led her to avoid the strangers, as innocent Aunt Milly supposed — sitting there as if on a throne, entirely assuming the part of mistress of the house, and receiving the homage of her guests. Evidently everybody was surprised — everybody had understood Miss Mortimer to have withdrawn from any but the most secluded life; and I do not think I ever felt such a thrill of wonder and pity, and almost horror, as when, after all I had seen and noted, after her convulsive trembling and watchful readiness for any attack, after the way in which, this very day, she had retreated, stubborn but exhausted, upstairs, I saw her sitting here, in full evening dress, with jewels and ornaments; her watchful eyes gleaming stealthily round, and her ears alive to every sound. As I came forward I caught sight of Aunt Milly sitting silent by herself by a table, with a face full of the deepest perplexity and distress. She raised her troubled eyes to me, and grasped at my hand for a moment, as if to strengthen herself. She could not make it out — any attempt to decipher her sister's purpose was vain to Aunt Milly — the light might as well have tried to comprehend the darkness. But I had not time to say anything to her. Miss Mortimer had called Harry, who drew me along with him; and it was she who introduced us to the rector and his sister, and to that heavy old Sir George, and the

Penrhyns of Eden Castle. I am sure I cannot tell what she said; it was principally Harry she spoke of, and I remember that she called him their heir and nearest relation, which gained us a very flattering reception from the strangers. But the mere fact of seeing her there, with her bare arms and shoulders shining thin through just such another scarf as I had on, and her eyes meeting everybody else's with a certain wide-open vigilant stare, and her head held stiffly erect to dissemble that trembling, which, even still, she could not overcome, at once confounded and engrossed me so much that I could observe nothing else. Harry got into conversation with the gentlemen, and Miss Kate, from the Rectory, a woman evidently full of curiosity and enterprise, seized upon Miss Mortimer. I managed to get away to Aunt Milly; she took my hand again, and pressed it almost painfully. "My dear, what do you suppose *this* means?" said Aunt Milly, looking wistfully up in my face.

"To defy everybody," I said, scarcely knowing what I was saying; "but, dear Aunt Milly, you warned me to be on my guard. You look so troubled, people will fancy something is wrong."

When I said that, she got up hastily and joined the others. I can't tell how the strangers felt; but for all of us who belonged to the house, it is impossible to imagine any scene more extraordinary. To see the dauntless, unnatural wickedness of that woman facing and defying everybody — to see her

take the principal place, and ignore the troubled, terrified sister, whose guests these people really were — out of all the mysterious veil of secresy and darkness in which she had been wrapped, to watch her emerging thus, not only as if nothing were wrong with her, but as if, in reality, she was the soul of everything, and dear Aunt Milly only her shadow and servant! When Miss Mortimer took the head of the table at dinner, and Aunt Milly astonished, and not knowing what to make of it, dropped into a seat near the foot, where Harry was, our dismay and wonder were nearly at their climax. Aunt Milly clasped my hand hard; she had got a chair placed in the corner beside me, and whispered, "I don't mind it, my dear, don't think I mind it. If all was well, and I had known her meaning!" I understood that perfectly; but then all was not well, and nobody had known that weird woman's meaning. Now she had it all in her own hands. With her grey hair, and her thin bare aged shoulders peeping out of her scarf, she made a dreadful pretence of flirting with that old Sir George; and curious Miss Kate sat scrutinising her, and making perpetual remarks; and Aunt Milly and I looked on with an awe and alarm which I could not describe. I could scarcely answer Mr. Penrhyn when he spoke to me. I fear he must have thought me a very poor representative of the Mortimers. But I could not keep my attention from that figure at the head of the table. I could not help wondering, did she see the writing and the man's

hand upon the wall? for in all her pretences, and affectations, and coquetries, — those strange coquetries, and gestures, and movements of the head and hands, which might have been pretty in a young beauty, but were so dismal in a white-haired old woman — remember, *she never once forgot.* I could see it plain in her eyes all the time. If the handwriting had come upon the wall, as it did in Belshazzar's palace, it would not have surprised her. No allusion that could be made would shock or startle her. She knew everything that could come; and, in her devilish daring, she was prepared for all.

I hope it is not very wicked of me to use such words; indeed, I cannot tell what others I could use.

Things went on so till we got back to the drawing-room, which was a relief in its way. And by dint of continuing so long, the pressure had, of course, grown easier, and I had actually begun to make a little acquaintance with Mrs. Penrhyn, who was young, and had little children of her own, and quite insisted I should take her upstairs to see baby, when I was suddenly recalled from the very agreeable talk we were just falling into, by the sharp voice of Miss Kate.

"Have you heard any more of that young Italian, Miss Milly?" said Miss Kate; "he that struck me, you know, as having so odd a resemblance to your family? — very strange! and you did not perceive it yourself? I hear he has been seen about here again, and his servant, that stout person. Ah, how

very sad he doesn't know English, that poor fellow! perhaps he has picked up a little since. Of all the sad things in the world, I know nothing so melancholy as being in the midst of light, and yet, for such a trifling thing as the want of language, remaining in darkness. I have never forgiven myself for neglecting Italian since that day. Ah, I wish I knew Italian as you do, Miss Mortimer. Who can tell what use I might have been to that poor benighted man!"

I had turned aside, with the words stopped on my very lips, to listen. So had Aunt Milly, looking aghast, and with every tinge of colour blanched from her face. Miss Mortimer did not observe me; but she noticed her sister, and stared at her with actually a little pause and smile of malice, to direct everybody's attention to her startled face, before she spoke.

"I can't speak even my own language now," was all Miss Mortimer said; and all the time looked at Aunt Milly with that derisive look, as if to show that whoever was agitated by this reference it was not herself. I was so wicked as to think she meant to turn over the scandal, if any should rise, upon her sister; and it made my blood boil; but, to be sure, I was quite in error there.

"Oh, I am sure after to-night —!" cried Miss Kate; "Indeed, my dear Miss Mortimer, I must congratulate you. I hope it is the beginning of a new life. If you would but take a little interest in

the parish, with your improved health, I am sure it would do so much good; and if you should happen to meet that unfortunate young man, and would be induced to explain the truth to him a little in his own language — —"

Here Miss Mortimer gave an extraordinary kind of gasp, without, however, uttering any sound. Nobody observed it but me, as my eyes were fixed on her. Then she spoke as if she could not help herself, drawing back into the shadow. "He speaks English!" she said, with an extraordinary tone of being compelled to say something — as if some influence within her had constrained the words from her unwilling tongue.

"But, ah, it is the servant I speak of," cried Miss Kate; "one soul is just as precious as another; it is he, poor unfortunate man! If you should meet him in any of your drives, — he is very stout, and has a large beard, and is so completely the foreigner that you can't mistake him, — if you would only stop the carriage and say a word in season."

There was another wonderful contraction of all the muscles of Miss Mortimer's face, and this time a kind of hysterical sound came with it. "If I meet him," she said, slowly, "I'll give him a word in season — don't be afraid," and she laughed. It made me shiver and tremble all over. I was thankful that Ellis came that moment with tea, and I could get up and go into another corner of the room to recover myself. I don't know how Aunt Milly

bore it. She had not a particle of colour in her face the whole evening after. But Miss Mortimer went upstairs steadily when all the guests were gone. I do not know what befell when she got into her own room. I do not think they had much rest there that night. If she had fallen down in a fit, or expired at the head of the table that evening, it would not have surprised me. She had lived through it; but I am sure neither she nor her poor faithful maid closed their eyes that night.

CHAPTER XI.

The day after that, was the day we had fixed to go back to Chester. Miss Mortimer did not come downstairs; but Carson came to me with a little packet while I was helping Lizzie to pack up baby's things. The poor woman looked ill and strange herself. She had a scared terrified expression, as if she were afraid of everybody, and looked so worn-out and exhausted that I could scarcely help telling her, for pity's sake, to go and get some sleep.

"My missis sends her love," said Carson, "and she's very sorry she can't come downstairs to see you, ma'am, nor the Captain, but hopes it won't be long till you're here again; and sends you this, and her love."

"Is Miss Mortimer ill?" said I.

Carson hesitated before she answered.

"It's on her nerves," she said, at last, faltering; "it's — I mean, to be sure, she's a little overtired because of overdoing of herself last night. It was out of compliment to the Captain, ma'am, and you. My missis has a great spirit; but it's the body as is weak."

"Yes," said I, unable to restrain the impulse; "but, oh, Carson, don't you think she has just too

great a spirit? What if it kills her one of these days?"

The woman flashed up for a moment into an attempt at resentment and dignity; but, partly from her weakness of watching and want of sleep, broke down immediately, and shed a few tears in her apron. The poor creature's heart was moved. "If it kills her she'll die; but she'll never give in," sobbed Carson; and then, recovering herself all at once — "it's on the nerves, that's what it is," said the faithful servant, and hurried away.

It was some time before I cared to open Miss Mortimer's packet. It contained two rings, one of them a slight turquoise thing, which was for me, and the other a fine diamond, which was to be given to my husband. "Tell him it's a family jewel," said a little accompanying note. I put it down on Harry's dressing-table, where he would find it when he came in. *I* would not put such a present on his finger; besides, it was best he should have it direct from herself — she had always received *him* as the representative of the Mortimers, and not me.

And then Aunt Milly came upstairs to kiss and cry over us. I was very sad myself, as was natural. There was nothing now between me and Harry's going, but a few weeks — rather a few days. I should look straight into the face of that dreadful approaching moment when we turned our backs on the Park. I could not cry as Aunt Milly did. I felt to myself as if I had been trifling all this time,

taken up with other people's affairs, and making friends with strangers, while every hour was bringing us closer to that day. Dear Aunt Milly held me fast in her arms, and whispered everything in the world she could think of to console me: that I had baby; that I should have letters regularly; that the war would not last long; that I must trust God, and pray. Ah, as if I did not know all that! if I had not known it and gone over it all in my own mind a thousand times, there might have been some comfort in what she said.

"And look here," said Aunt Milly, thrusting a purse into my pocket — not into my hand, to give me a chance of putting it back again — "he is our representative, dear. He is not to go a step till he has everything — everything you can so much as think upon to make him comfortable. Now, Milly, don't say a word. I'll think you don't love me if you say a word. Will it be any comfort to you, or me, to think here's some paltry money left, and Harry gone to fight for us all without something that would make him comfortable? You'd work your fingers off to get it for him, and you have no excuse for denying me. Don't say anything to Harry, child. Men don't understand these things. It's between you and me; and, please God, we'll tell him all our little schemes when we get him back safe, the dear fellow. But, dear, what is that on the table? Sarah's diamond! that one she has always had such a fancy for. Has she sent it to you?"

"To Harry," said I.

"To Harry! Dear, dear, what creatures we are!" cried Aunt Milly, much agitated, and bursting into tears again. "Poor Sarah! she's not so hard-hearted as you and me were thinking, Milly. Oh, God help her: if He would only bring her to deal true and fair, and have out this trouble in the face of day, there might be some comfort yet for her in this very life!"

I made no answer. I did not love Miss Mortimer, as I suppose, in some sort of a way, her sister did; and, besides, my thoughts were all turned in another direction again. I had ceased to see the Park and its troubles so acutely as I had done for some days past. My mind was returned to my own private burden. I had little to say to anybody after that. I turned away even from Aunt Milly, with a dreadful feeling that I was not to see her again till Harry was gone. For I knew in my heart, though they never said anything to me, that this was how it was to be. I had not the heart to talk even to Harry, as we drove slowly back to Chester — slowly, as I fancied. We went in the carriage all the way. We had no railway or tunnel to go through this time. Nothing to help me to a moment's delusion of plunging away to the end of the world, or into the bowels of the earth, it did not matter which, *all together*. That was impossible. Miss Mortimer's carriage put nothing in my mind

but the inevitable parting, and all that was to happen to me after Harry was gone.

When we got to our Chester lodgings, Domenico was there, as usual, full of the noisiest, kindest bustle, to help in getting everything in, as if he had belonged to us, instead of belonging to a stranger, who, most likely, had little reason to bear the heirs of the Mortimers any good will. Mr. Luigi was standing at the window all the time, looking at the carriage, the horses, the servants; thinking, perhaps, they might all have been his under different circumstances. How could I tell what he was thinking? I am sure at that moment, though I observed him at the window, I took no pains to imagine what his thoughts were, and did not care. I did not care for anything just then. It was one of my bad times. It was one of the hundred partings which I had with Harry before the real parting came. When the things were lifted out of the carriage, I could see them all in my own mind lifted in again, all but Harry's share of them, and myself sitting blind in that corner with all the world dark before me. Well, well; it is no use reasoning over it, as if that would make things any better. Thousands and thousands were just the same as me; did that make it any better, do you suppose? I thought of the poor woman in the Edinburgh High Street, and her hard damp hand that pressed mine. I was a soldier's wife like all the rest. I went up into my own room

and got Harry's old sash again, and bound it tight over my heart. It gave me a kind of ease, somehow. And to hear baby shouting at sight of his old toys, and Harry calling for his Milly darling, downstairs! It was an agony of happiness and anguish; it was life.

CHAPTER XII.

The very next day Sara Cresswell came to see me. I cannot say that I was very glad, for I grudged everything now that did not belong to the one business which was engrossing us. I had been out that morning with Harry trying to get things that were necessary for him. I don't mean the common articles of his outfit, for these, now that we had money enough, could be ordered at once without contriving; but the little conveniences that might make him more comfortable. He protested that I would load him with so many contrivances for comfort that comfort would be impossible; and, I daresay, I *was* foolish. But he let me do it without more than just laughing at me. He knew it was a sort of consolation. When Sara came the room was in a litter with all sorts of portable apparatus; things for cooking, and lamps, and portable dressing things, and the wonderful convenient portmanteaus they make now-a-days. I was putting them all together, and comparing, and thinking all how he would do when, instead of home, where everything came naturally, without being asked for, he should have only these skeletons to make himself comfortable with. I had lighted the lamp, and was boiling the little kettle over it, to see how it would do.

Ah, if we only had been going all together! If I could have imagined myself there to boil the kettle and have everything warm and nice for him when he came in from the trenches, how pleasant all these contrivances would have been! As it was I had just had his servant up and been showing him the things we had bought; he looking grim and half amused, touching his cap and saying, "Yes, ma'am," to every word I said, but laughing in his mind at all my womanish nonsense. I could see that perfectly, and I had a good cry after the man was gone; and was just rousing up from that, to boil the little kettle, when Sara Cresswell came in.

In this short week there was a good deal of change upon Sara. Her eyes had a quick kind of fitful light in them gleaming about everywhere, as if she were somehow dissatisfied, either with herself or her own circumstances, and sought a kind of relief in external things. There was a change in her appearance too; her little short curls had either grown too long to cluster about her neck as she had worn them, or she had taken another caprice about this fashion of hers, for they were now all gathered into a net, a thing which changed her appearance, somehow, without one being able to see for the first minute how it was. She flushed up wonderfully when she saw my occupation. She came and kissed me, and sat down by me to watch the lamp. I had to explain to her all about it, how it was arranged, and everything; and after she had sat with me

watching till the little kettle boiled, all at once it seemed to flash upon her what dreadful thing was implied to me in that little apparatus, and she suddenly looked up in my face and took hold of my hand, and burst out crying. I gave way just for one moment too, but even her presence and her sympathy kept me from breaking down altogether. But it warmed my heart to Sara to see her crying for my trouble. I took the little tea-pot out of the place it was fitted into and made some tea, and gave her some without saying anything. We sat by the table where that little lamp was still burning, throwing the steady, cheerful little flame that showed so strange in the daylight, upon us. We drank that tea together without saying anything, till Sara, not being able to contain herself, her heart quite running over with pity for me, took the cup out of my hand and threw her arms round me. "We shall be sisters while he is away!" cried Sara, not knowing what to say to comfort me. I don't think I said anything; but we were real fast friends from that day.

"But I must have everything cleared away now, before Harry comes in," said I; "he must not see all this litter we have been making. He thinks me foolish enough already. Go into the other room, Sara dear, and take a book and wait for me. Lizzie is out with baby. I'll come to you presently."

"As if I could not help!" cried Sara, dashing the tears away off her cheek. "Why, oh, Milly,

why won't people let us women do what we were born to? This is twenty times pleasanter than going into the other room and taking a book."

And so, I daresay, it was. When everything was tidy we did go into the other room. Sara sat near the window, where she could see out without being seen herself. I took up some of Harry's things that I had begun to make before Aunt Milly's money came. I would have made them every one myself if I could, but that, to be sure, was impossible; and what a comfort it was to think he would have such a good supply of everything; but still it was a pleasure to me to have that work. We sat talking for some time about other things, about the Park, and Aunt Milly, and Miss Mortimer, but without touching upon anything but the surface, — how I liked them, and all that, — till at last Sara gave a little start and exclamation, and put her hands together. It was something she saw in the street. I rose to look over her shoulder what it was.

"There is Mr. Langham and Mr. Luigi," cried Sara. "What can they be talking about? Are they coming in, I wonder? How earnest they both look! Now they are turning back again. Oh, Milly, tell me, please! what are they talking about?"

"How can I possibly tell you?" said I; but I suppose there was a little faltering and consciousness in my tone.

Sara sat watching for some time longer. "They

walk up and down, quite engrossed in their conversation," said Sara; "when they reach the end of the pavement, they turn back again, up and down, up and down. Now Mr. Langham seems urging something upon him — now he turns away, he clasps his hands together, he appeals to Mr. Langham. What is it? what is it all about? I never can persuade him to tell me. How does he belong to the Park or the Mortimers? Why are they frightened for him? Oh, Milly, you who have just come from them, tell me what it is? I am not asking from vain curiosity — I — I — I have a right —"

Here Sara stopped, overcome with agitation. I was close behind her. I could not help growing agitated too.

"Sara, tell *me!*" I cried; "we are both motherless creatures, and you have nobody to guide you. Tell me; you call him *he*, you don't say his name. What is he to you?"

Sara turned back and leant her head upon me, and fell into a passion of tears again; — different tears — tears for herself, and out of the anguish of her heart. She was doing wrong — she knew she was doing wrong — she had gone on with it wilfully, knowing it was wrong all the time; and now she had gone too far to draw back.

"Oh, Milly, Milly, papa does not know!" she cried, in such a tone of misery. And, indeed, I don't wonder. How could she look him in the face knowing how fond of her he was?

"But, Sara, this is dreadfully wrong of Mr. Luigi," cried I; "he ought to know better; he should at least have gone to Mr. Cresswell. It is his fault."

"Was it your Harry's fault?" cried Sara, starting up in my face, all flushed and glowing. "Should he gave gone directly and told everybody? And you were married, *married*, Milly! — and ever such a time before it was found out. How *can* you pretend to be so shocked with me?"

To see her spring up, all blushing and beautiful, and determined as she was — she who had been sobbing on my shoulder a moment before, took me entirely by surprise. I retreated a step before her. I could not tell what answer to make. She was not ashamed, the little daring creature! She was ready to stand up for him against all the world.

"It was not my good father that loved me, it was only my aunt," I said, faltering; "and, besides, it was I who should have told her; and as for Harry — Harry ——"

"He is no better than Luigi!" cried Sara; "he ought to have gone and told and asked for you. You know he should: and you were married, actually *married;* and oh, Milly, can you really venture to scold me?"

"If I had nothing else to excuse me I was ashamed, at least," said I, a little sharply.

"I am not ashamed of Lewis!" cried the little girl, stamping her little foot and clasping her hands

together. When her courage deserted her, she came and nestled into my side again, and clasped her arms round me tight and cried. What was to be done? for whatever I might have done myself I could not be an accessory to Sara's secret, to break her kind father's heart.

"But tell me who he is? What is Mr. Langham speaking to him about?" whispered Sara at last.

"Has he not told you who he is?"

"Only that soon he will be able to come to papa and tell him everything, but that his duty to somebody prevents him speaking now, till he has permission," said Sara, under her breath. "I am not excusing him," she went on, lifting up her head. "As you say, it was my part to tell papa; and it was only just the other day that — that — there was anything to tell. We have not been going on making it up for a long time. We have not been keeping it secret for months, like some people."

"Sara, hush," said I; "you know quite well your case and mine are not alike; but, at any rate, I am older and wiser now. Must I, or must Harry, go and tell your father?"

Sara looked at me with a degree of affectionate spite and wickedness I never saw equalled. "You would, you treacherous, perfidious creature!" she cried, flinging away from me; "but Mr. Langham wouldn't! — you need not think it. You will have to go yourself; and papa will think we have had a

quarrel, and won't believe you. Ah, Milly! here they are coming back. Tell me what Mr. Langham was saying to him? Tell me what it all is?"

If I had known ever so well what to tell her, and been as willing as I was able, I would have been prevented by Harry's coming in. He was looking grave and perplexed. His interview with Luigi had not satisfied *him*, any more than such a conversation had satisfied anybody else who approached the Italian. Sara stopped short with the most violent blush on her face when she saw him. She withdrew from me, and got into a corner. She went to the window, and pretended to be looking out very earnestly. She answered Harry's salutation only over my shoulder. The next moment she came whispering to me that it was time for her to go. Evidently, however much she encouraged herself by our example, she could not face Harry. She whispered, "Don't tell!" and clenched her little fist at me as she went away. Of course I only laughed at her; but it appeared I did not need to tell Harry. He came upstairs, after seeing her out, with a smile on his face.

"Has she been telling you what trouble she has got herself into? Oh, don't betray her secret," said Harry. "I have just heard it from the other side. Here are other two fools following our example, Milly. What is to be done for them? It is worse, you know, in their case, as I took pains to show Luigi. Mr. Cresswell is a different person from

Aunt Connor: and we two were equal in our poverty. I don't approve," said Harry, with a laugh mingling in his gravity, "of such a thing as this."

"And what did he say?" said I, thinking, no doubt, that my Harry's wisdom had made the Italian ashamed of himself.

Harry laughed again, but grew rather red. "Word for word what I used to say when I was explaining to myself why I did not go and ask you from your Aunt Connor. I hope they'll have as good an issue as we have had, Milly, darling," said Harry. "But here's some extraordinary mistake again. Either we're mistaken in our guess, which I can't think possible, or poor Luigi's dreadfully mistaken in the laws of England and of civilised life. Perhaps he thinks our being Protestants makes an end of law. I can't tell what he thinks, nor what to think of the whole concern myself. He refuses my mediation, Milly; at least he tells me I am wrong."

"Wrong in what particular?" I asked, eagerly.

Harry shook his head. "I can't tell; but he will not hear of any compensation, or of giving up his pursuit of that poor old lady. When he saw what I meant he grew very hot and angry, and asked if I meant to insult him; but afterwards said to himself, 'It is in ignorance,' with a sort of magnanimity which would be simply ridiculous according to my notion of the affair. They'll have it out their own way, Milly. We can't interfere, that's clear; only I wish there was some light thrown upon it," said

Harry, "before I went away, that I might know what your fortune is likely to be. What would you say if this grand Park of yours turned out to be no inheritance for us at all?"

"I should not break my heart; but what *could* he have to do with the Park?" cried I. "If he were Mr. Mortimer's son, why should Miss Mortimer be so troubled about it? and how could he, if he is Miss Mortimer's ——"

"Hush, Milly; we don't know anything about it. Let's talk of our own concerns," said Harry, with a sigh. These words plunged me back again into the mood from which Sara had roused me. The other things went like shadows — this was the real life which belonged to us.

CHAPTER XIII.

I DON'T remember very well after that how these outside affairs went on. I used to see them both, of course. Sara came to me almost every day, and sometimes helped with my work, and sometimes played with baby, and sometimes would read aloud to me when Harry was out. She meant it very well, and was very good, and a comfort, as much as that was possible. I remember being glad when she read, and did not talk, for then I was free to my own thoughts. I daresay, thinking it over since, that it must have been just the fascination of seeing her constantly, which for that interval took precedence of everything in Luigi's mind, and kept him inactive; for I heard from Aunt Milly that he had not been to the Park again, nor heard of in any way, so far as she knew. And Miss Mortimer had been ailing too, and had very bad nights, and had been a whole week that she did not come downstairs. I heard all these things at the time without taking any notice of them. Harry, after finding himself so unsuccessful with Luigi, had given it all up; and we were both too much occupied with our own concerns to think of anything else. We did not talk much of what was to happen when he was gone. It had come to be tacitly concluded that I was to go

with Aunt Milly; and, I suppose, that thought that crossed Harry's mind after his conversation with Luigi, — "What if the Park should turn out to be no inheritance of ours after all?" — had passed away again as it came. I can't say I ever thought of the Park at that time one way or another; and I am sure what Harry was glad for me to have, was not the prospect of a great fortune, but the presence of a dear friend.

One day he rode out to see Aunt Milly, and take leave of her. He saw them both, he told me, but nothing passed that I cared to inquire into. We had a great deal to do, which helped us to pull through these days. It was such a difficulty to get those things which I had collected, packed. Harry's servant came, and puffed and scratched his head over them, and poor Domenico came up to help; and what with his broad laughs and pantomime, and his determination to get everything in, and his cheerfulness over all his failures, and the ludicrous way in which he and Thomson addressed each other, each in his own language, and abused each other too, even I was obliged to laugh, and the assistants were all kept in good-humour. I feel as if it had been very dark all these days — often raining, always cloudy, the streets muddy and uncomfortable, and the air stifling. I can't tell whether it was so in reality, but it certainly seemed so to me.

Then the very last day came. Harry was specially busy all that day; there were all the men to

look after, and he was acting adjutant. I went out by myself to see whether I could not find anything else he might want. It was very fatiguing walking — I suppose it was a rainy day. When I came in I felt very faint, and sat down on a chair in the hall for an instant to recover myself. I can't tell how Luigi knew that I was there; but he came out to the door of his room, and stood looking at me for a moment. I got up, being jealous that anybody should see me break down, just then; but he held up his hand as if to beg me to stay.

"May I say how I think of you?" he said. "Just now you are never out of my mind, you and that brave Langham. Patience, patience! such men come back — they come back!"

"Oh, hush, hush, hush!" I cried. I could say nothing more, and pressed past him to go upstairs.

He put his hand on mine when I laid it on the rail of the stairs, detaining me. "We are cousins," he said, softly; "do not put me away. In my country we say cousin-brother — it does not matter, it is the same. I will be your brother if you will let me. Tell him. I am not to be ashamed of; he knows not; but if *she* will not do what is right, soon all the world must know. I am your brother, at your disposition. Say it to him. I will not come to say farewell to disturb you — but tell him; he shall trust me, and you may want a brother; we are of one blood."

"Oh, let me go!" I cried. "I can't ask you

how this is. I can't thank you, though I am sure it is kindness. I can't think of anything to-day; let me go."

Luigi kissed my hand, and let me go. It startled me very much for the moment. I rushed upstairs, feeling as if he had been rude to me; — but indeed he had not been rude to me, nor anything the least like it. But it startled me into realising all that was going to happen. That I should be alone as to-morrow. I remember running and clutching at the blinds which were down, and drawing them up with great haste, and almost passion. It seemed to me as if that dim light were predicting something; as if the furniture standing about was looking on, and knew what was going to be. Now the time was come; I had gone over it and over it in my fancy; this would be the last of my rehearsals; to-morrow Harry would be away.

And the to-morrow came, as they always do. I did not feel in the least diminished in my strength. I did not feel I had any body at all that morning. I went with him to the railway steadily, you may suppose. I would not lose a moment of the time we were to be together in any folly about myself. I remember him saying something about me going home alone, and all that, as men *will* do. But I did not lose sight of him till the last moment when the train disappeared into the tunnel; and I can't tell how long I stood there watching, after it had vanished far into that darkness. Now he was gone!

Another train came up, and the crowd disturbed me standing there all by myself. I did not feel as if it were true; but I went away all the same. I said to myself, over and over again, "He is gone;" but it did me no good. I went out of the railway not believing in it. Outside there was the cab waiting for me. But Domenico rushed forward to open the door, and somehow they had contrived that Lizzie and baby should be there to take me home. I heard afterwards that Luigi and Domenico were both watching close by all the time, in case I should faint, or something. I suppose they thought I would faint, not knowing any better. Lizzie's great eyes, panic-struck, gazing in my face, full of tears that she durst not let fall, struck me quite strangely when I got into the cab; and then little Harry stretched out his arms to me — and then —. But even at the worst it was not so dreadful as I thought it would be. I was not sitting blind and desperate, with all the world dark before me. No, no; and God forgive me for thinking I should. Harry was living and well, and gone to do his duty; and this was his boy smiling in my face, and the sun was shining —. And I had to live, and to be patient, and to pray.

When we got home, Aunt Milly's kind face anxiously gazing out of the window, was the first thing I saw. She came running downstairs to take me in her arms; she seemed to think it strange I could walk in so steadily, and did not want any

support. Sara was upstairs too. I have no doubt it was kind, the kindest thing possible; but I felt dreadfully fatigued, somehow, with that morning's work. I could have liked to have been by myself a little. I went to my own room to put off my bonnet, and sat down with a kind of pang of comfort. I thought I was *glad* it was over; and then my eye fell on Harry's old scarf — and somehow the silence came ringing about my ears with no "Milly, darling!" sounding through it; and I began to see it was true, and he was away.

When Aunt Milly came stealing into the room after me, she dropped down by my side where I was kneeling, and put her kind arms round my waist. "Yes, dear, cry!" said Aunt Milly, "it will do you good!" But I did not cry after that — I was better. I was glad it was over now.

We waited till we had a message by the telegraph to say the ship was just sailing out of the Mersey; for Harry had stopped with me till the very last moment. And then we went away. I remember everything so clearly that happened that day. I remember how the sun kept shining, and how they all looked at me as if I had been ill, and had to be watched and cared for at every step. It was all very new to me. In the hall, as we were going away, Luigi came up to me again. Aunt Milly had made me take her arm; not that I needed it, but she seemed to think I ought to need it. Luigi came and took my hand. "Remember!" he said,

"I am your brother, at your disposition, till he comes back." I don't think I made him any answer; for the very sight of him made Aunt Milly tremble. He went out after us to put us into the carriage, and somehow managed to do it, though Aunt Milly was afraid of him. He put her in last of all, and kissed her hand. Aunt Milly did not say anything to me for a long time after. She kept gazing out of the carriage windows as long as she could see Luigi; and I have a kind of consciousness that he stood there, with his hat off, as long as we could be seen on the road. For the moment she had returned into her own trouble and forgotten mine. I leaned out of the other window, and felt the wind on my face. Ah, God send the winds were safe upon the sea! He was gone — really gone. I was not even to hear of him for a long time; and when I was to see him, God knew alone. I was swept out of his sight, and he out of mine, as if we did not belong to each other. There was only One now, in heaven or earth, that at the same moment could see him and me. When I thought of that it melted all my heart. Our Father, the only father we two had, saw us both, with no boundaries between us — all that time when I could neither see nor hear of Harry, God was my link to my husband. He knew. We were both in His eye if we were worlds asunder. There, we were near to each other, however else we might be separate. The impression came so strong upon

me that for the moment I could not say I was less than *glad*. No distance in the world, though it put us for a time out of sight of each other, could ever put us out of the sight of God.

CHAPTER XIV.

Nobody will be surprised when I say, that, after this, things got into their usual way very soon, and that when the event was over, everything subsided round it, and soon Aunt Milly began to forget that I was the invalid (in spirit) whom she had taken such tender care of, and brought back all her budget of perplexities and troubles to pour them into my ear; and after a day or two's retirement in my own room, which was an ease to me, I went downstairs and about, and took a share in everything. Miss Mortimer had got better of her illness, if illness it was. She sat within the screen as usual, doing her knitting, and not taking much notice of anybody. I don't know whether she had really suffered in her health, but it seemed to me that she got thinner, and that sometimes there was a gleam of fiery restrained excitement in her eyes, which were rather cold eyes by nature. We were told that she still had very bad nights; and I am sure, two or three times when I met poor Carson by accident, it took all my self-control to keep me from speaking to her, and begging her to deliver herself, somehow, from this dreadful yoke. I never saw exhaustion and a kind of weak despair so written upon anybody's face. These bad nights, whatever they might be to

the mistress, must have been murderous work to the poor maid.

"My dear," said Aunt Milly, "I shall never forget that young man's look as he put me into the carriage, and kissed my hand." Aunt Milly held out her plump soft hand as she spoke, and looked at it. "They have a habit of doing so, these Italians. But if you will believe me, Milly, it was actually an *affectionate* look the poor young fellow gave me; and I have never asked you what he meant; he was your brother, he said. My dear, what did he mean? Ah, I remember how disappointed I was to find that he was not your brother, and Richard Mortimer's son. That would have been such a happy solution of everything! but tell me why he called himself your brother? Was it only sympathy, Milly?"

"He said we were of the same blood; he said we were relations," said I, with some hesitation.

The book she had been reading fell out of Aunt Milly's hand. "Relations!" she cried, faltering and growing pale; "then, Milly, there can be no doubt at all about it. Milly, I tell you he must be my father's son; how could you be *relations?* And indeed, indeed," cried Aunt Milly, growing more and more agitated, "I can't bear this any longer. Now you are with me to support me, I must take it into my own hands. I will go and write to him this moment, and ask him down here to clear it all up. Don't say anything — I must do it; it is impossible to go on living in this way."

"But Miss Mortimer?" said I.

"Miss Mortimer?" cried Aunt Milly, with a little scream, that was almost hysterical, "what can my sister Sarah have to do with it? It is no harder upon her than it is upon me. If he is my father's son, how can she be mixed up in it? And how can you and he be relations unless he is my father's son? Don't speak to me, Milly. He shall come here and tell it all, and at least we shall know what there is to fear."

"But if she were too much excited it might make her ill," said I, dreading that visit, without knowing anything to say against it.

"I can't help it!" cried Aunt Milly, "I am desperate. Think of living and enjoying what doesn't belong to you! Oh, Milly, Milly! what do you think I must do? I never was in secrets and mysteries before; it's dreadful to me; and Sarah would not yield to tell what she's kept hidden so long, not for her life. We'll see how she looks to-night. I did not think she looked any worse than usual. I would not hurt her, you may be sure, not for any relief to myself; but we can't go on with this hanging over us, Milly," she said, with faltering lips. "I'll write to-morrow; I certainly will write to-morrow. Relations! My dear, dear child, it will be a dreadful disappointment to you, but that is as good as proof."

Poor Aunt Milly! she was desperate, as she said; and what good it would do writing, or asking, or

even demanding anything, that one of the people who knew it would guard at the cost of her life, and that the other would disclose only at his own time, I could not see. Luigi had refused to tell her already; he would not tell Sara Cresswell. He was waiting a permission that never, never in this world would be given. And he, too, must be deluded. What could he think our laws or our principles were if he could have any rights, but those of shame? It was all a mystery; I could see that Aunt Milly's idea was quite a false one. But I dared not tell her that idea of my own, which, perhaps, for anything I knew, might prove as false as hers.

That morning I went out with Lizzie and my boy. He could walk now along the sunny road holding my finger, and trot after his own little shadow, and try to catch the motes in the sunshine, as I suppose all babies do — but, to be sure, it is just as original and strange in every child that does it, for all that. I was walking by him, very tranquil and even contented in my mind. There had been very quiet weather; and little Harry was so well and so beautiful; and I felt so much more as if I could trust my Harry himself in God's hands without trembling for him every moment, that my heart opened out a little to the beautiful day. I don't know that I could have borne to see Domenico, much less to speak to him, but for that —

For there was Domenico, unmistakably, on the

edge of the common. He was dressed in a white linen suit, all white, as if he wanted to make his enormous bulk and his black beard as remarkable as possible in this beardless and sober-minded country. It was warm weather now, and I daresay he thought the hot summer was coming as in his own home. Baby, with whom he had always been a favourite, gave a little shout at sight of him, and tottered forward a step or two. Of course Domenico's hat had been in his hand from the first moment he saw me. He threw it down on the grass now, and seized little Harry, and tossed him up in his arms. I was afraid of this play, but my brave boy was not; he actually boxed at Lizzie with his little fists when I begged Domenico to set him down.

"Pardon," said Domenico; "I — me — make demand of the signora, pardon — it pleases to the piccolo signorino beebee. I — Domenico — here — this," said the great fellow, punching his breast, that I might be quite sure of the person he meant, "take joy in heart for see the signora another time."

"Thank you, Domenico," said I. "I shall never forget how kind you have been. What is it that brings you here?"

Domenico pointed round to various points of the compass, not seeming sure which to fix upon, and then burst into a great laugh at himself. "It pleases to the signora to pardon," said Domenico; "when not to have the book, not clevare to make the speak. Here is the master of me."

"Your master, Domenico? — where?" cried I.

Once more Domenico looked round to all the points of the compass. "He here — he there — puff — Ecco! — he move far away — to make the time go. Here my master come to make the visit — the signora not to know the other signora? Yes, yes; in that large big palazzo of not any colour Behold! The my master there go."

"Who is he going to see there?" asked I, with some anxiety.

Domenico held up his hand with many elaborate gestures of caution and silence. Then he bent his enormous person forward and stooped to my ear. When he spoke it was in a whisper. "It is need to speak silent — silent! The signora contessa," said Domenico, with the half-important, half-guilty air of one who communicates a secret. I drew back from him in utter bewilderment — what could he mean?

"There is no contessa there, Domenico," said I, in my ordinary tone; "your master is deceived."

Domenico held up his hand with an evident entreaty that I would be cautious. Then he looked back upon Lizzie, the only person in sight. "I not fear for the Lizzie," said Domenico; and then launched forth into a half-whispered description of the contessa, whoever that might be. But I confess that Domenico's description, being Italian whenever he warmed, and only when he slackened and recollected himself falling into such English as he was capable of, was difficult to make out. I fully entered

into Lizzie's feeling, that it was "awfu' fickle to ken what he meant when it was a long story." I remained profoundly bewildered, and unable to make out one word in ten. As for learning anything about the contessa — poor fellow! — or, rather, it was his master that was to be pitied — evidently here was some new mistake, some additional impediment to the finding out of this mystery. I left Lizzie with little Harry on the common, and went rather sadly home. This little bit of apparent foolishness naturally set me all astray as to the mysterious business which had cost us so much thought. Was it a mistake of Domenico's, perhaps? for Luigi and Miss Mortimer had actually met, and there could be no mistake there.

When I looked back that great white apparition was keeping Lizzie company on the common. They were a strange couple; but I cannot say I had any such doubts or fears concerning Domenico's attendance, as a proper mistress ought to have had. I flattered myself Lizzie was a great deal too young to take any harm. She stood with her red-brown hair a little blown about her eyes; her clear, sanguine complexion, her angular and still awkward figure, looking up at the man-monster beside her, and holding up her hand to shade her eyes from the sun, which was shining in her face. While Domenico, with all his great proportions expanded by his white dress, impended over her, his smiling mouth opening in the midst of his black beard, an *outre*

extraordinary foreign figure, enough to drive any staid English village out of its propriety. I remember the picture they made as distinctly as possible, with the green common surrounding them, and the gorse bushes all bursting into flower; and my own beautiful baby tottering about the fragrant grass. I was quite secure in Lizzie's love and Domenico's kindness. I went away with a smile at the curious group upon that soft English common — both figures alien to the soil — and with a tenderness in my breast to them both. Domenico had made himself well understood in another language, if not in that of ordinary spoken communications. I shall always have a kindness to his whole nation for that good fellow's sake.

As I paused at the gate of the Park, I saw another figure advancing by an opposite road. I recognised Luigi in a moment. He was coming hurriedly down between the green hedges, no doubt coming to pay that visit of which Domenico had warned me. I rushed in, with all the eagerness of a child, to get my bonnet off and be in the drawing-room before he came.

CHAPTER XV.

When I reached the drawing-room, after throwing off my bonnet and arranging my hair in the most breathless haste, terrified to hear the summons at the door before I was downstairs, I was thunderstruck to find Sara Cresswell there. The sight of her made an end of my awkward feeling of shame for my own haste and curiosity. Surely this was nothing less than a crisis that was coming. Sara had just arrived, and was explaining the reasons for her visit in such a very fluent and demonstrative way, that I could see at once they were all made up, and some motive entirely different from those she mentioned had brought her. She was still in her hat and velvet jacket, seated rather on the edge of her chair, talking very volubly, but looking breathless and anxious, while Aunt Milly, who was sitting in her own place, opposite her sister, and near the fireplace, looked at her, perplexed and uncertain, evidently rather suspicious of the many motives which had procured us this visit; which, if Sara had only said nothing about it, would have been received as a delightful surprise, and wanted no accounting for. It was evidently a great relief to Sara when I came in; she came to kiss me, turning her face away from Aunt Milly, and caught hold of me so tight, and gave me such a troubled, emphatic

look, that even if I had not heard before, I should have known something was coming. I stood by her breathless for a moment, wondering why the door-bell did not ring, — Luigi had certainly had abundant time to have got to the door, — and then went up to the other end of the room on pretence of finding my work; while Sara, instead of following me, dropped into her chair again, evidently too nervous, too anxious, too eager to see the first of it and lose nothing, to do anything but sit still. We were both traitors and plotters. She had come to watch something that was about to happen, but which the principal person concerned did not know. While I, more cruel still, took my trembling way up to the other end of the apartment, and stationed myself behind Aunt Milly, that I might not lose a look or word from Miss Mortimer. I felt ashamed of myself, but I could not help it. I felt a kind of conviction that this was to be the decisive day.

But still there was no sound at the door; there was time to look round all the peaceable vast room, and be struck by the quietness, the repose of the scene in which some act of this mysterious drama was about to be enacted. It was always very light here, but the bright day and the sunshine out of doors, made it now even lighter than usual, and refused to any of us the slightest shade for our faces, whatever undue expression might come to them. Sara had adopted the only expedient possible, by turning her back upon the light, and had, besides, a

little shelter in her hat. But dear Aunt Milly, looking at her favourite with a troubled inquiring expression, and laying down the work she had in hand in order to examine Sara's countenance the better, was so fully set forth in all her looks, movements, and almost feelings, by that broad clear daylight, that I shrank back from it in spite of myself, fearing that it would betray me too. The only shadow in the room was that afforded by Miss Mortimer's screen. She sat there just as usual, in her violet-coloured dress, her light muslin embroidered scarf, worn without any lining, now that the weather was warm, and her pretty cap, with ribbons corresponding to her dress; her head moving so slightly that it was difficult to perceive the motion; her pattern-book open on her knee, her head bent over it. At this moment, when the thunders of Providence were just about to break over her, she sat there, with her head over her knitting-book, counting her stitches, and trying a new pattern. When I saw how she was occupied, my own trembling pretence at work fell from my hands. I gazed at her openly with a wonder which was almost awe. My heart cried out against her in her dread composure. The Avenger was coming, and there she sat, all conscious, aware, in every nerve, of her guilt, and yet able to maintain that hideous calm. Yes! it would have been sublime had she been a good woman, threatened by some undeserved doom. I declare it was ghastly, devilish, dreadful to me!

All this time nobody came to the door. I daresay, perhaps, it was not very many minutes after all; but in the excitement and suspense it seemed a very long time to me. And either the house was specially quiet, or there was something in my agitated condition which made me think so. Miss Mortimer never lifted her head; if she had not been so engaged with her pattern, surely she would have noticed the perplexed looks of Aunt Milly, and my excited face. But she did not, she kept working on at her new stitch. We all relapsed into perfect silence; Sara's voluble excuses for herself died all at once off her lips. Aunt Milly dropped into a strange anxious silence, looking at her. As for myself, I could not have spoken a word whatever had been the consequences. Sara's nervous motion of her foot on the carpet startled me so much that I had nearly committed myself by some cry of agitation. It was a dread, inexplainable pause, which nobody dared either break or account for. Dead silence and expectation. And Miss Mortimer bending her head over her pattern-book counting the loops for her new stitch.

The bell did not ring. If it had rung it might have startled us all so much as to diminish the sense of what was coming; there was no such premonition; —a little sound of steps and subdued voices in the hall made my heart beat so loud that I felt sure Aunt Milly must have heard it. Sara looked up at me suddenly when that sound became audible. Her

face was perfectly colourless, and her hands firmly clasped together.

"Children, what is it?" said Aunt Milly, with a sharp frightened cry, breaking off suddenly in a troubled manner as the steps drew nearer. Miss Mortimer lifted her head from her book. She looked up, she looked full at me; she smiled. She was listening, but she was not afraid.

When suddenly the door was thrown open; Ellis called out, with his fullest voice, "The Count Sermoneta," and somebody came in. I cannot tell who it was that came in. I heard Sara cry out with a kind of shriek and repeat the name, "The Count Sermoneta!" The work and the book and all the trifling matters about her fell off from Miss Mortimer. She rose up, clenching her hand, ghastly, like a dead woman. She cried out in a voice I shall never forget; "He is dead, *dead!*" she cried, with the wildest scream and outcry. "I tell you, he is dead, dead! My God, he is dead! Will nobody believe me?" shrieked out the miserable woman. Her sister ran to her, and was thrust away with those terrible clenched hands. But she never turned to look, nor cast aside her screen that hid the new comer from her. She stood still like some frightful statue, rigid, with her wild eyes fixed upon the air before her — heaven knows what she might see there! — listening in some frightful agony to the steps that came slowly up the room. When that

scream burst from her the footsteps faltered and stopped. Then Miss Mortimer looked at me, the only creature she saw before her, and laughed a dreadful laugh of madness and misery. "He knows it!" she cried out, triumphantly, "if you did not, he does. He is dead, dead!" and then came to another dreadful pause, leaning her clenched hands upon the table and fixing her wild eyes upon something straight before her. While I followed the mad stare of her eyes with a shudder I could not refrain, another person came with noiseless rapidity into the spot she was gazing on. It was not a spectre — it was simply Luigi, from whose face agitation had banished all the colour, and who stood trembling and speechless, wringing his hands, and gazing at her with an unspeakable appeal and entreaty. She did not say anything more; she stood with her eyes full opened and staring wide, leaning her hands on that table. I believe, if anybody had touched her, she would have fallen. I almost believed, while I looked at her, that she had died standing, and that it was a lifeless form that stood fixed in that horrible erect attitude, fronting us all, fronting a thousand times more than us, all the guilt and sins of her life. I gave a cry myself in the extremity of my terror and trouble. I went to her, I cannot tell how, stumbling over Aunt Milly, who had either fallen or fainted, or I cannot tell what. I went and put my arm round that dreadful ghastly figure. It was not her I was approaching, but *it*,

the terrible mask and image of her. I had not a thought but that she was dead.

When I touched her, she fell, as I had thought she would. But so strong an impression did her dreadful appearance have upon me, that, when her figure sank into the chair and showed some elasticity, instead of going down on the floor, crumbling down, dropping to pieces, as somehow I had expected, I was struck with a horrible fear and surprise. She was not dead. I called out to them all, what were we to do? and she seemed to hear me. I saw, with a terror I cannot explain, her terrible eyes turn from Luigi — they looked at me, at Aunt Milly, they cast a glance over the room. Was it that the spirit was living and the body dead?

I cannot tell what we did for a dreadful interval after that. Carson came into the confused crowd. Luigi disappeared to find a doctor, and we tried to get her lifted and laid upon the sofa. But though she neither moved nor spoke, and scarcely seemed to breathe, she resisted, in some dreadful way, and would not be removed. I shall never forget that dreadful face; when I am ill it comes back to me, a recollection never to be banished; — dead — yet never consenting to die, keeping alive, determined, resolute, unshaken. I can see the discoloured lips begin to move, the words formed on the inarticulate tongue, the eyes lightening out of that fixed stare. Half the house had stolen into the room in this dreadful emergency without anybody observing them.

But the dead woman observed them. And I, who was standing nearest, recoiled from her side, and the whole circle round her broke up and fell back in speechless horror, when a sound broke from that dreadful convulsed mouth. Only Carson, trembling but faithful, stood by her mistress. The poor creature said she understood that sound. It was to send everybody away, said the woman, whose limbs would scarcely support her, and whose very teeth chattered. They all went away, terrified but curious; the boldest lingered behind the screen. Nobody remained within sight of those dreadful eyes but Aunt Milly and me. We two stood huddled on each other, not daring to say a word, or even to exchange looks. Carson stood by her mistress' side. Carson knew all and everything, more than we knew. She held some cordial to the dead lips, she chafed the ghastly hand, she gazed with pitiful eyes and tears and entreaties at the terrible face. This woman was not deserted in her terrible necessity. The voice of that humble love reached somehow to the springs of existence, and she came back slowly, in a solemn, fearful waking, out of death into life. We stood looking on, with an awe and terror impossible to describe. It was a miracle slowly enacting before us. She was dead and was alive again. Ghastly and dreadful, like a woman out of the grave, 'Miss Mortimer woke up to all her misery again.

CHAPTER XVI.

This extraordinary revival was going on when the doctor rushed in. Carson, who had been the principal person in all this scene, rushed at him and drew him back. She kept her hand on his arm, detained him, ran into voluble but trembling explanations. When he came forward the doctor gazed with a troubled face at the patient. A fainting fit brought on by great agitation; nobody could give any other account of it; he felt her pulse, and prescribed, and lingered, and looked at us all with mingled inquiry and suspicion. What had we been doing to her? Why had not she been removed to bed? A flash came from the awakening eyes. She made a motion of her hand, waving him away, then looked at me, and pointed vaguely but imperatively before her. When I did not obey immediately, she repeated the question, and at last spoke, with great evident pain, impatience, and imperiousness: "Bring him?" were those the words? She was so imperative, so fiercely determined, that I hastened out to call Luigi. I found him at the door watching, very pale, and in profound distress. He came in after me without saying a word; he went up to her without waiting for me, and knelt down at her feet, and took her hands in his own. "Mother! Mother!" cried the

young man. If it did not go to her heart, it went to the heart of every other person present; and Aunt Milly, with a great cry of amazement and terror, repeated it after him, "Mother!" But who could think of any discovery then? The doctor stood listening, thunderstruck, behind the screen. I believe Sara Cresswell was in the room. But we who were round about this terrible figure could observe nothing else, except the dread inarticulate waves of passion that kept rising in her dead face. She thrust at her son with a wild motion of her bloodless hands as if to put him away. She questioned him with her eyes in such frantic impatience, because he could not understand her, that the sight was more than I could bear. I fell back away from her trembling and like to faint. Then her will got the better of her weakness. She cried out aloud, with a voice that I am sure could have been heard all over the house; —it was not a living voice; it rang out wild, and loud, and hard, in separate words, — "Where is he? — *he?* dead! let him come; — Count!" and here the terrible voice rose and broke in a wild horror of babbling cries. God help us! It was a dreadful scene. Aunt Milly stood supporting herself by a chair, unable to utter a word or even to move. I was afraid to stir, lest I should faint and fall on the floor. Carson only stood close by her mistress, supporting her head and gazing with wistful eyes at Luigi; the young man stumbled up from his knees in an agony of pity and horror. He held up his

hands in wild appeal, whether to her, or to us, or only to God, I cannot tell. "It is my father!" he cried. "She thinks it was my father; and I am to blame!" Then he knelt down again humbly at her feet, and held up his clasped hands to her as if he were praying. I think he must have done it with an intention of drawing her attention by any means, and to prove to her that it was the truth he said.

"Mother," he cried, looking up at those eyes which had returned, and were fixed upon him, — "mother, I am your son! My father is dead and undisturbed in his grave; he has sent me to his wife. It is I, it is no other. He is with the saints, where there are no names. It is I who am Sermoneta; mother! Oh, heaven, does she not hear me? *will* she not hear me? It was I, only I. It was Luigi, Countess! If I must not bear your name, I must bear my own. I say it was I, not my father, who can neither do evil nor endure it, — me, either Luigi Sermoneta or Lewis Mortimer, as you will, — your son!"

It is impossible to describe the effect this had upon us all. Aunt Milly burst forth into weeping, convulsive, and not to be restrained. Poor Carson's bosom heaved with silent sobs. Luigi, who had risen up as he said these last words, stood erect in a passionate self-assertion and defence before his miserable mother. Even she changed under this sudden blaze of revelation. She sat up in her chair, and grew more human; her rigid head began to tremble,

her dread eyes to lose their horror. Now it was no longer that mad ghastly stare with which she regarded the young man before her. She looked at him, leaning forward, slowly recovering her powers. Some convulsive gasps or sobs in her throat alone interrupted this pause of terrible silence. She looked at him, from head to foot, with a slow, dismal scrutiny. Only once before in her life had she met him face to face; then she had been strong enough to send him away and disown him. Now, perforce, the mother looked at her son. The young man trembled under that steady gaze; he held out his hands, and cried out "Mother!" as if all the eloquence in the world lay in that word. She continued perusing him all over with that slow examination. Gradually she returned to be herself again. Not changed, not subdued! Out of that death and agony there came forth, not a repentant woman, but Sarah Mortimer, a creature who would not believe in everlasting truth and justice — not though one should rise from the dead.

"If you are Count Sermoneta," she said, with all her old expression, pausing between the words to get strength, but speaking in her usual voice, "how do you dare come to me and offer what your father refused? Impostor! you shall never, never, never sit in my father's 'place! I disown you. I — I have nothing to do with you. What! would you kill me again?"

Here I interposed; I could not help myself. My

very soul sickened at her. I came forward, without knowing what I was doing. "Let her alone," I cried out, "don't say anything. She has died and come alive again, and is no better. Do you think you can move her? Oh, Aunt Milly, it is your part now. Take him away out of her sight, leave her alone in her wretchedness. Can you bear to see her smiling there? — *smiling* at us! She is dead, and it is a devil that has come into her frame!"

"Milly, hush, hush, you are mad," cried Sara Cresswell, behind me; but Aunt Milly did not think I was mad. She came and put her arm into Luigi's, her tears driven away by horror and indignation. "As sure as God sees us all," cried Aunt Milly, "I will do you justice. Come away from her, as Milly says. You make her wickeder and wickeder — Oh, wickeder than she really is! Oh, Sarah," she cried out, turning suddenly round, "is it true? — is he your son?"

Miss Mortimer said nothing; — the very colour had returned to her face. Her head trembled excessively, but she had forced some frightful caricature of a smile upon her lip. She held out her hand and pointed at them in a kind of derision. "You were always a fool," she said at last, with a gasp. Aunt Milly did not wait or hesitate any longer. She was possessed, like me, with a sudden impatience and intolerance of that inhuman hard-heartedness. She went away hastily out of the room, drawing Luigi with her. Miss Mortimer listened to the sound of

their steps till it had quite died away. Then she turned round to Carson with some instinctive confession of weakness at last. Their eyes met; but even Carson could no longer receive this dreadful confidence. She stumbled back from her mistress with a cry. "I cannot, I cannot!" cried Carson, "anything but this. I held him in my arms a baby, and I'll never disown him, if I was to die." As her mistress turned round upon her, Carson retreated back till she came to the wall, and stood there, fixed and desperate, holding up her hands as if to keep off these pursuing eyes. "Whatever you please!" cried Carson, "but not to disown him as I dressed the first day he was in this world. No! not for no payment nor coaxing! I've served you faithful all times and seasons, but I'll not do no more, not if I was to die!"

Miss Mortimer sat gazing at her rebellious maid. What no other appeal could do this did. She sank into the frail old woman she was, as she gazed at Carson, who had forsaken her. She broke forth into feeble, passionate tears. She could bear to send her son away from her, but she could not bear to lose her faithful companion and attendant of forty years. "Carson!" cried the poor broken voice, in a tone of absolute despair. Then Miss Mortimer rose up. I ran forward to her in terror, and so did Sara, but she waved us both away, steadied herself, cast a long look upon the woman who stood trembling against the wall, and slowly turned to make her way out of

the room. She walked like some one upon whom sudden blindness had fallen, wavering, stopping to steady herself, putting out her hand to pilot the way, groping through the piercing daylight that penetrated every corner of the room. We followed her, trembling and terrified. As she went slowly through the long room, heavy sobs came from her poor breast, sobs of which she was not conscious; her muslin scarf had been torn and crushed in her dreadful faint, if it was a faint, and hung all dishevelled from her shoulders. One hand hung loosely down by her side, the other she groped with as she made her way. Now and then she moaned aloud. Oh, miserable forsaken creature! there had been still one link of life to hold her on to the living world.

We went after her, silent, hushing our very steps lest she should turn upon us, and watching with a perfect awe of wonder how she steered herself through the room; she stumbled on the stair, but still rejected any assistance. All the way up she went forlorn, accepting no support. When we reached her door, I rushed forward not to let her shut me out. "Let me be your maid to-night," I cried out, laying my hand upon hers. Her hand made me shiver; it was cold, as if it had actually been dead. She pushed me back, not looking at me, and shut the door. What she did, or how she sustained herself in that vacant room, we could see no longer. Sara and I, arrested at the door, turned and looked into each other's faces. Sara broke out into the passionate

tears of excitement and agitation which could be restrained no longer. "She will kill herself!" cried Sara. "Oh, godmamma, let me in, let *me* in. I will never cross you or trouble you. I will wait upon you night and day; godmamma!" No answer came. We tried to open the door, but she had fastened it. We could do nothing but leave her alone in this dreadful solitude. For a little while a rustling sound of motion was in the room, and still those pathetic, unconscious moans breaking at intervals into the silence. But after awhile all became still. She had not fainted or fallen, for we should have heard her. She made no answer to our entreaties — dead silence reigned in the room where that living spirit, with all its dread forces and passions, palpitated within its veil of worn-out flesh. I could imagine her taking possession of that dreadful solitude, losing at a blow far more than reputation or fair-fame, all that made her life tolerable to her, entering upon a new, unthought of, murderous purgatory. We could not make up our minds to leave that closed door. Sara was still crying, and almost hysterical with her long strain of excitement. I made her go into the neighbouring room, where Lizzie was with my boy while I ran downstairs for Aunt Milly. Oh, what a contrast it was! I snatched little Harry into my arms to kiss him, and went away again, with a pity, I cannot describe, past the door where that dreadful forsaken woman lay alone in the silence. I could not bear it. God alone knew how she had sinned;

but to leave her thus deserted in her misery was not in the heart of man.

I ran downstairs very hastily without waiting to think — at the foot of the stair Carson stood crying. She gasped out an inquiry at me which was not audible at first. "Is she alone? alone? alone? Will nobody stay with her?" cried Carson. "Oh, ma'am, my missis will never let me near her again! I know it's no use trying; but, for the love of mercy, let somebody get into the room! There's poisons and all sorts there. God forgive me! couldn't I have held my tongue?" cried the poor woman, in an agony of terror. I was angry with her in the impatience of my thoughts. I did not consider for how many long years Carson had endured all.

"But why can't you go up now? try if she will let you in; she is fond of you, Carson," said I. "Oh, go, go, and try."

"She'll never look at me more," said Carson, with mournful certainty; "but I'll go, I'll try. If it was at the end of the world, I'd go; but she'll never see me again." The poor woman went upstairs saying this over to herself, and dreadful as it was to think so, I was certain she was right.

And I went on to the library where Aunt Milly was. She had fortgotten her sister. She was listening, with a glowing face, with tears, and outcries, and lamentations, to the tale Luigi told her. Some papers were lying before them, and a miniature, which caught my eye even at such a moment — a picture

of a lovely fair woman, imperious and splendid. I cannot say that it bore any resemblance to the wretched, solitary creature upstairs; but I knew it was Sarah Mortimer, — Sarah Mortimer, unkind, untrue, a woman making no account of love or tenderness; but not the Sarah Mortimer who had delivered herself to the devil, and turned her back upon nature. I pointed at it unconsciously in my excitement. It was easier than naming her name.

"Do you know she is alone upstairs, by herself?" I cried, "perhaps dying, and nobody with her! Aunt Milly, you are her sister. She will neither let us in, nor answer us. You have a right to go to her. There are all kind of dangerous things in the room — she might die!"

"But Carson — Carson is there," cried Aunt Milly, grasping my hand, to bring me to myself. "My dear, Carson is a better companion than either you or me."

"But Carson has gone," I cried, "Carson will never be with her any more. Hush! was that a sound upstairs? Come, I entreat you! She is all alone, quite alone, not a creature with her. It is heart-rending to think what she is doing there — come! come!"

Aunt Milly still stood perplexed. She could not comprehend Carson's absence, and I might have had a long account of the whole matter to go through had not Luigi come to my assistance. He took her hand hurriedly, and pressed it in his own.

"My aunt, I can wait," said Luigi, "and I *will* till there is time for me; but my mother, my mother is —"

Aunt Milly started, and understood all in a moment. His mother, the unfortunate wretched woman who had disowned and rejected him — no need for over-much explaining, or setting-forth of all the darker shades of the picture to show her wretchedness. Nature and she had parted company, and there was nothing too dreadful that might not befall her in the fatal silence of that secluded room.

CHAPTER XVII.

ALL the remainder of that dreadful afternoon we spent in vain endeavours to get admission. No answer came to us from those closed doors — silence, dead and unbroken, was within those concealing walls, which it seemed wonderful to me did not beat and throb with the torturing life within them. The whole house was disturbed, as was to be supposed. While we stood in an anxious, troubled group round Miss Mortimer's door, Carson, with her melancholy and ashamed face, stood anxious and terrified at a little distance — the maids below came to take furtive peeps upon the stairs — and Ellis himself stood listening in the hall, catching at every sound. The whole house was conscious of some dreadful crisis, which had occurred or was occurring; and even in the frightful anxiety which possessed us, Aunt Milly began to feel that extraordinary infraction of all the decorums of such a house. She whispered to Sara to leave us, and go downstairs to restore the equilibrium of the household a little, and sent Carson into Lizzie's room, where the poor creature sank, overpowered and almost fainting, upon the bed. Then Aunt Milly went away to her own apartment, and came back with a huge bunch of keys. With these in her hand she motioned me

to follow her round about into the little corridor to which Miss Mortimer's dressing-room opened. "Milly, stand by me," she cried, with a sob. "I'd rather face so many lions than go in upon her against her will — but it must be — I cannot help myself. After what we saw to-day, I should be guilty, I should be a criminal — don't you think so, Milly? — if I left her alone to-night."

It was getting dusk, and the light was pale and ghastly in that little corridor which was close upon the backstairs, and very bare and chill. The door opened without the assistance of the keys. We went into the little luxurious room where the fire burned brightly, warm though the weather was, and which bore all the marks of being lived in and cherished. An easy-chair and footstool were placed at the side of the fire, and close by stood a little table with a raised ornamental rim, like a tray, in which some books and some of Miss Mortimer's materials for work were placed. At the other end of the room was a window, where stood a plain rush-bottomed chair and a large round basket of work; there was Carson's place; and the union of the two in this their joint retirement and dwelling-place — the junction of the lady's luxuries and the servant's labours in this habitation common to them both — struck me with a pathetic force, now that this old, long, immemorial connection was brought to a close so hurriedly. Aunt Milly did not linger in this room; she went straight to the door leading into the bed-

chamber which was fastened. "Sarah," she called softly, "Sarah!" there was no answer. We listened, and the silence round was dreadful; the silence and the gathering twilight, and the terrible mystery of life or death that lay in that closed-up room. Then she tried the keys with her trembling hands. Still not a word from the solitary within, not even of remonstrance or indignation. After what seemed to us a dreadful tedious interval, in which the night appeared visibly to darken round us, the lock at length yielded. The key that had been in it fell, with a dull, heavy sound, inside, making our hearts beat. Then Aunt Milly opened the door. I shall never forget the sensation with which I entered that dark room. What we were to find there, a ghastly corpse or a miserable living creature, nobody could tell; treading on the soft carpets that made our footsteps noiseless, brushing past those soft-drawn curtains which shut out every draught, coming into this atmosphere of care, and comfort, and luxury, the contrast was almost too dreadful to bear. I remember trying to listen for her breath, but could not for the terrified beating of my own heart. The darkness made everything more dreadful still, for the blinds were drawn down, and the little light there was fell so faintly through them that we could scarcely find our way through the room. Aunt Milly was before me; she made a terrified plunge forward, and gave a cry as we came past the head of the bed, which was towards the dressing-room door.

Something lay in a heap on the floor by the side of the bed. She threw herself down on the floor beside that heap. I don't think she was conscious, even when she touched it, what it was; but as I rushed to help her, as I thought, I was suddenly arrested by a gleam of eyes from the bed. "I am not dead," said Miss Mortimer. I could not help nor command myself. Some scream or shriek came from me in the extremity of my awe and terror. I could hear it answered by a sudden stir and commotion outside the door. "They're killing my mistress," cried Lizzie's voice; and with the wildest alarm lest some violent attack on the door should follow, I rushed to it, opened it, and asked for lights.

Outside were half the household grouped at various distances. No precautions could stifle that eager curiosity which knew by instinct that some wonderful mystery was here. They all dispersed when they saw me, frightened and ashamed of themselves. Only Lizzie kept her ground. She seized hold of my sleeve and detained me. "You're no to stay there!" cried Lizzie. "Oh, no *you*, no *you!* You'll gang and let them kill you, and the bairn'll perish, and the Captain never come hame! Let *me* in! I'll get the drinks and keep up the fire, and never close an e'e; but it's no you that's to watch, and you the light o' folks e'en. It's no to be you! If I was to gang to my bed and sleep, what would the Captain say to me?" cried poor Lizzie, with a trembling burst of excitement and anxiety, standing

close up by me, holding my sleeve, pressing to enter the room. Somehow it comforted me, though it was a piece of folly. I told her again to get the lights, and went back into the dark, solemn room. These sounds of the outside world had not entered there. Miss Mortimer lay on the bed with her eyes wide-awake and gleaming, gathering into them all the little light in the room. Aunt Milly stood beside her, asking how she was; herself scarcely recovered from the shock that had been given her by that heap of clothes upon the floor, trembling, not knowing very well what she said, her great yearning anxiety and curiosity to get at her sister's heart, overflowing in uneasy questions. Did she feel ill? Would she have anything? How was she? Miss Mortimer took no notice of her questions. She repeated once "I am not dead," with a strange spitefulness and defiance, and for the rest lay silent, looking at me as I moved about the room, a dark undecipherable figure, and at poor Aunt Milly standing beside me. She took no other notice. It seemed to please her to lie there silent, defying all our curiosity. But she did not complain or find fault with our presence. I believe in my heart she was glad to have her dreadful solitude thus broken, and that it was a comfort to her desolation to see living creatures moving in the darkness. I connot help thinking so; but after that one expression, twice repeated, not all the anxious questions of her sister could bring a syllable to her lips.

When the candles came she closed her eyes; then, after a little interval, made a wrench at the curtains and gave an impatient sigh. The sigh was for Carson, who doubtless knew exactly what she liked and what she did not like. The fire was laid already in the grate, and I lighted it, and began to put away those things which lay on the floor. Wherever I moved, when it was within her sight, she followed me with her eyes from within the crimson shadow of the curtain. She was perfectly composed and self-possessed. She was even well as it appeared. The ghastly colour had disappeared from her face. She lay there self-absorbed, as she had sat over her knitting. All the dread incidents of this day had passed over, and left Sarah Mortimer unchanged. Such a woman could deny, defy, live through anything. I watched her with indescribable awe and ——. Well! I had pitied her while she was alone; but do you suppose I could love such a woman, lying there unmoved and unrepentant, in her dread self-occupation? It was not possible. I hated her, loathed her, turned away with sickening and disgust from her dreadful looks. It was hard, even, to pity her now.

CHAPTER XVIII.

I HAD with difficulty overcome Aunt Milly. I had represented to her how much better I was able to bear it than she, and Aunt Milly herself had sent off Sara Cresswell to bed. It was late at night, and all the house was still. We were both together in the dressing-room. Nothing would persuade dear Aunt Milly to leave me alone to this vigil. She wrapped herself in a shawl and lay down upon the sofa. "I am at hand the moment I am wanted," she said. I had kissed baby, and said my prayers beside him. I was not frightened or nervous now. I went in, wrapped in my dressing-gown, to look at my patient. She stretched out her hand, and then when she saw me, drew it back again with a fretful groan, and turned her face to the wall. It was Carson, still Carson, whom she missed at every turn. But she did not answer me when I asked if she wanted anything, she only groaned again with a dismal impotence and impatience. I sat and watched her at a distance while she lay there in that broad wakefulness, her eyes wandering to and fro, her mind evidently wandering, too, into never-ending thought. It was to me a spirit, somehow, chained and fettered to a body it could not throw off, which lay in irksome confinement on that bed, — a spirit

ever active, sleepless, evil. Why was I sitting up with her? she was not even ill. Was it that she had died that day, and some wicked spirit had taken possession of the exhausted frame? I declare that this idea returned to me in spite of myself. I could not escape from it; as the night crept on strange fears came over me. Her eyes fascinated mine. I could not withdraw my gaze from those two gleams of strange light within the crimson curtains, moving about from minute to minute with their restless observation. What was she thinking of? Could she tell that, under this roof, the roof of his fathers, her injured son was sleeping? Was she thinking of her youth, her life, the past, with all its dread, pertinacious, stubborn cruelty? I did not know then how the extraordinary story told by Luigi could be harmonised into possibility. I could not think of any story; I could think of nothing but that solitary woman pursuing those sleepless thoughts, which nobody shared, through all the dread recesses of her conscience, through all the scenes, visible to her only, of her hidden mysterious life.

It must have been about midnight when some one knocked softly at the door. It made me start painfully with a terror I could not subdue. I rose to see who it was, trembling at the summons. It was Carson, who called me anxiously into the dressing-room. She did not say anything, but drew me to a little medicine-chest, which she opened, and from which, all silently, with the speed of long cus-

tom, she took a little bottle, and dropped some of its contents into a glass of water. "You must put this by her bedside," whispered Carson, "and here are all her medicines; but don't drop them yourself, for the love of pity! — you've no experience. You might give her her death. When my missis wants her draughts, will you call me?" While I promised to do so, Aunt Milly woke up from a short sleep. "Has anything happened, Milly?" she cried, starting up suddenly. Nothing had happened but that her start had thrown down a footstool, and made a noise which sounded dreadful in the calm of the night. The three of us dispersed hastily upon that sound. Carson disappeared out of the room. Aunt Milly sat up trembling on the sofa. I went back to the patient. The noise had roused her. She had struggled up in bed, and was trying to look round to the dressing-room door.

"Who is it?" she cried, when I went in, her eyes fixing on me with something of the dreadful expression they had in the drawing-room, as if she had lost control over them, and the orbs turned wildly out and fluttered to the light. "If it's *him*, let him come here."

"It was only Carson," I said.

"Carson? let her not come near me. I will do her an injury," cried Miss Mortimer, with wild exasperation. Then she suffered herself to fall back on her pillows. "They're all in a plot," she went on, "all in a plot, the very woman I trusted; I shall

never trust anybody any more. But here's the wonderful thing; she is just as great a coward as she is a fool; and to think she should hate me so much as to be able to go up and down these passages in the middle of the night with a dead man! Hark, there they are!"

I fell back from the bedside at the words, unable to refrain from a shudder of horror.

"You're afraid," said Miss Mortimer, looking at me with a kind of contemptuous curiosity. "Yet you saw him come in yesterday and you did not faint. I remember seeing you stare and stare. Ah! it's strange to see a dead man!"

"I saw nobody but Luigi; nobody but your son," cried I, in dismay.

When it was said I drew back in alarm, lest the words should rouse her into passion. But they did not. She was beyond that.

"I could not see him, though," she continued, going on in her dreadful monologue; "it was only a kind of feeling he was there, and the scent of the syringas in the garden. You know it's very overpowering; those they call the Virgin's Breast. It was that made me faint."

Here she fixed her eyes on me again, as if she imagined that she had been setting up a plausible plea and dared me to contradict it.

"I wonder if he's as handsome now he's dead," she went on in a very low tone; "he was never as handsome for a man as I was for a woman. I'll

never, never speak to Carson again; but you might ask her if he's kept his looks. Ah! I thought I saw some one behind the curtains there; but he'll never appear to me. For he swore, you know, he swore, he was never to give me any trouble, and he kept his word till he died."

"Oh, Miss Mortimer," — I cried, coming forward to the bed with the glass in my hand. She held out hers eagerly, and interrupted me.

"Miss Mortimer! to be sure I am Miss Mortimer; I have always been Miss Mortimer, you know that; then what's all this made up story about a son? For, you know," she said, sinking her voice again into a whisper, and holding the glass in her hand, "to be called countess would have been a temptation to many a woman. But I never would have it, not for a day, never after he refused to take our name. That's what a man calls love, you know. You shall take his name if it's a beggar's, and he will not take yours if it brings a kingdom. But I was not the sort of woman to be a beggarly Italian countess. And I've beaten him in his grave," she cried out, in ghastly triumph, — "in his grave I've got the victory over him! Here's the child on his knees to me to call him Lewis Mortimer. Ah! you're Richard Mortimer's daughter. I might have married Richard if I had known how things were going to turn out. We'll set it all right to-morrow. Yes; stand by me, and we'll set it all right, all right. There's no dead man shall conquer me. Do you

hear? There he is pacing about the passage as he used to do when I refused to see him. But he dared not come in; no, not if I had been a thousand times his wife."

And I cannot help it if people may think me a fool; there were steps outside in the passage. If it was a living creature I cannot tell; but, as certain as I live, there were footsteps going up and down, up and down, with a heavy, melancholy tread. She looked at me full in the face as we heard them going on. She began to tremble so that the bed shook under her; her eyes grew wilder, her colour more ghastly. In spite of all she said, she was stricken to her very heart with fear.

And as for me, I did not feel I had courage to open the door. I called out, "Whoever you are, go away, I beseech, — go away! She cannot rest while you are here." The steps stopped in a moment; then, after a pause, went on and went away, growing fainter in the distance. Thank heaven it must have been somebody living! perhaps Carson, perhaps her son.

When I came back to the bedside she had dropped asleep — actually, in the midst of her terror, had fallen into an unnatural slumber. It was an opiate that Carson had given her. The little medicine-chest was full of different kinds of opiates. Scarcely one of them that was not marked poison. I looked into the dressing-room for a minute to comfort poor Aunt Milly who had heard all her sister

said, and was in a dreadful state of agitation. She kissed me and blessed me, and leaned her dear kind head upon my shoulder for the moment I dared stay beside her. "She would never have said so much to me," said Aunt Milly, and wrapped her own shawl round me, and tried to make me take some wine which she had brought upstairs. When I would not take that, lest it should make me sleepy, Aunt Milly got up from the sofa to make some tea for me. Everybody knows such nights — everybody knows how some one always tries to comfort the watcher with such attentions — tender, useless, heart-breaking attempts at outside consolation. I went back to the sick room with a pang both of relief and anguish. If it had been my husband or my baby that I was watching! Thank God it was not so! but the picture came before me with a terrible force just then, when I did not know where Harry was, nor how he might be lying, nor who might be watching over him. I tried to shut out my own thoughts from this room; but who could ever do that? I fancied I could see white soldiers' huts rising in the darkness, and groans of wounded men. It was a relief to me when my patient groaned and turned in her bed. But she did not wake; she lay all night long in what seemed more like a stupor than a sleep, interrupted by groans and stifled outcries, and long sighs that broke one's heart. No wonder we had heard of her bad nights.

In the morning, when she woke at last, Miss

Mortimer turned round upon me with a half-stupefied, wondering stare. Then she recollected herself. She did not speak; but I saw all the thoughts of the previous night come slowly back to her face. She watched me arranging the room in the cheerful morning light; she even permitted me to raise her among her pillows, and swallowed, though with an effort, the tea I brought her. She bore no malice against me for anything I had said. She seemed even pleased to have me beside her; but it was not for my sake; I believe she thought I was doing it for an interested reason. And she — she thought she had found an accomplice in me.

This morning she spoke with difficulty, and her looks were changed. She looked ill, very ill. The morning light showed a strange widening and breadth about her eyes, a solemn fixed expression in her face, which, though I had never watched it coming before, went to my heart with an instinctive chill and recognition. She could not bear me to be out of her sight for a moment. When I went to the dressing-room door to speak a word to Aunt Milly she called me back with an impatient, stifled cry. At last she beckoned me close to her bedside.

"I want — I want — send — let him come," she stammered out.

"Luigi?" I said.

She clasped her hands together in an access of passion. "To make my will," she cried, with a kind of scream; "now — now — this moment."

When she had uttered the words she fell back panting, a flush of weakness and fever coming to her face. I went and told Aunt Milly, who, all troubled as she was, sent off a messenger immediately for Mr. Cresswell. "I will send for the doctor, too, and — and the clergyman; but what can Dr. Roberts do for *her*?" cried poor Aunt Milly, wringing her hands. The clergyman! What, indeed, could that sleek, comfortable man do, at this deathbed of guilt and passion? Ah me! A poor priest might have done something, perhaps, or a poor preacher accustomed to matters of life and death.

The day glided on while we waited. She would not let me leave her; but she did not say anything, except disjointed murmurs, and strange broken conversations with herself. It was not the present time that her mind was busy with. Listening in the silence of that room I became aware of a passionate prime of life, an Italian summer, a bitter mortification, disappointment, revenge — revenge which had come back upon the remorseless inflictor, and made her life the desert it had been. It all opened up before me in breaks and glimpses; afterwards, when I knew the story, it was with the force of an actual representation that I remembered this broken, unconscious autobiography. She was not raving; she was only calling up and setting in order the incidents of that crisis of her life. I cannot follow her through it now; but I remember that the awe, and interest, and excitement kept me from feeling

any weariness. I could not turn away for any sort of refreshment; I sat fascinated before that revelation of the secret of her days. She seemed to have foresworn husband and child, life itself and all that made it bearable, in dreadful vengeance for some broken promise or unfulfilled vow. Her father came flitting across the troubled picture; the count, and some dreadful controversy about a name, all intermixed with recollections of certain rooms and their furniture; of a garden and a thicket of syringas. What that point of deception or disappointment was, on which the whole story turned, I could not tell; but for this she had left the stream of life when life was at its fullest promise; for this she had settled down in a frightful, stubborn determination, behind that screen in the drawing-room of the Park. All her after existence, huddled up into one long monotonous day, had not made these scenes less fresh in her memory. This was how she had revenged herself — on the Count, who was dead — on her son, whom she disowned and cast away from her; ah! above all, a thousand times more bitterly, on herself.

It was afternoon when Mr. Cresswell came. He was brought up to the room immediately, without a word of explanation, and accordingly knew nothing of all the dreadful history of the last twenty-four hours. He had not even a hint that anything was changed, except the health of Miss Mortimer. He came and expressed his concern in the common-place

tone of an unexcited stranger; he expressed his surprise to see me with her. In his heart he set it down that this will was of my suggesting. I am certain he did; and smiled to find me the nurse of the sick woman. But Miss Mortimer (that I should still go on calling her by that name after all I had heard!) left him very little time. She recovered herself wonderfully at sight of him; her very utterance became easier in the anxiety she showed to express herself plainly. She was impatient of his inquiries and condolences. She moved her hands uneasily about the bed, and for a moment her eyes fluttered as they had done the day before; but as soon as he had prepared his papers, and taken his pen in hand, she was composed again. My heart beat so loud with anxiety to hear what she said, that I could scarcely breathe. Was she now at last to set right the injustice of her life?

"Write," she cried, with a gasp for breath, "that I leave everything — mind, it is everything, Bob Cresswell, no partitions. My sister Milly, though she is a fool, is as fond of her, ah! as — I am — all the Park and the lands belonging to it, to Millicent Mortimer. There! the young soldier's wife; and to — eh! who is it? Who speaks to me?"

I grasped her hand hard in my sudden passion. It was cold, cold, a dead hand, and horrified me with its touch. "Stop," I cried, "oh, stop, Mr. Cresswell; she cannot mean such horrible injustice! Miss Mortimer! Countess! whatever you are! will

you dare to die and never repent? Do you think I will let you bring a curse on my innocent baby? Stop! Stop! I forbid it, for her soul's sake!"

Mr. Cresswell pushed back his chair and stared in amazement too great for words. She looked at me with a strange air of cunning and superior wisdom, and then at him. "She thinks," said the dying woman, in a kind of whisper, addressing Mr. Cresswell, "to draw me into some foolish talk, and bring it up against the will. Fool! they are all fools; go on."

"What does it mean?" he said, looking at me.

"It means that she ought to do justice," I cried; "that it is all she can do now; that she is going to die without repenting, without making amends. If you write it, it will be a sin."

"Bob Cresswell, go on; it is I who am the person to be attended to," said Miss Mortimer. "This creature, do you hear, is a fool. I know what I mean."

"There is something here I don't understand; my dear lady, you're not so very ill, suppose we put it off," said the lawyer, in great perplexity; "and there's Miss Milly, you know, she has her share in the Park."

"Attend to *me!*" cried Miss Mortimer, wildly. "You will kill me; am I to be thwarted *now*, as well as all my life? Oh, good heavens! in my own house, and in bed, and perhaps going to die — and

I am not to have my will, my will! I shall have my will, if I should write it myself!"

She stretched out her eager hand towards the writing things, stretching out of bed, and by some chance touched Mr. Cresswell. When he felt that deathly touch he grew very grave, and started with a shudder. He took up his pen immediately.

"I will do what you please," he said. He could not resist that cry of death.

CHAPTER XIX.

I RAN downstairs in desperation. I could not be content to let that dreadful mockery go on. It was vain, for we never, never, would have taken another man's rights; but for herself, the miserable, guilty woman, to hinder her by any means, to save her from putting that seal upon all her cruelty and falsehood. I saw nobody as I flew down the stairs, though afterwards I was conscious that Lizzie had been standing there with my beautiful innocent boy. Do you think I would consent for a kingdom to bring the curse of wrongful wealth upon little Harry? Not if starvation and misery had been the only other choice!

I burst into the library, where I knew Aunt Milly was. Pale with watching and anxiety, she was sitting propped up in an easy-chair, with Sara Cresswell and Luigi beside her. I believe they had been telling her their story, and she, straining her ear for every sound, had been trying to listen to them. When I came in she started up from her chair and came to meet me, unconsciously putting them away. "What is it, Milly?" she cried, putting out her arms to me. I dared not permit myself to rest or even lean upon her. I seized her hand and drew her to the door.

"Come up, and interfere," I cried; "she is making

her dreadful will. She is leaving everything to me. Come, before she has put the seal to all this misery. Aunt Milly, can you stand aside and let this be done?"

"My dear," said Aunt Milly, with a burst of tears, kissing me and looking in my face, "you know I love you, Milly; you know you are almost dearer to me now than any creature on earth."

I could not thank her; I had no time. I did not feel grateful or pleased, but only impatient. "Come! come!" I repeated almost with violence. I could not understand how she could delay.

"Let her do what she will," cried Aunt Milly. "If I go and argue with her, it will only make her worse. Oh, child! we can't cross her now; don't you see we can't cross her now? But I took a vow, as sure as God saw us, I would do justice," said Aunt Milly, solemnly, through her tears. "She can but do what she can. We are co-heiresses; she has no power but over her own share."

"Share!" I cried, "is it shares we have to think of? She is dying, and she does not repent."

I could not wait there any longer; they all followed upstairs, Aunt Milly holding my hand. They all came into the dressing-room, where we could faintly hear Miss Mortimer's voice, and where Carson stood trembling at the door. At this moment there was no order or rule in the stricken house. Then Aunt Milly went with me into the sick room. Mr. Cresswell was writing, and Miss Mortimer had

stopped speaking. She turned her eyes triumphantly upon us both.

"I have carried out your wishes, Milly. I have left everything to your favourite," she said, with pauses to get her breath. "You may sign it after me, and then it will be complete."

"Sarah, that boy, that boy!" cried Aunt Milly. "Oh, put out your hand to him just once — think, before it is finished, what claims he has. Give him something. Sarah! Sarah! you would not take me into your confidence; but I'll go down on my knees to you if you'll do justice to that boy!"

"I am going to die," said Miss Mortimer, after a pause. "I can see it in all your faces. I can't be much worse off than I've been here. But look you, Milly, if you come and drive me into passion; if that wretched boy so much as comes near me, I'll die directly, and you'll be my murderers. His father made the choice — and I will not change, no, not if he came again, as he did yesterday, with the dead man. Cresswell, I'm growing a little faint. Is it ready to sign?"

He brought it and laid it before her on the bed; and she called to me to raise her up. I was desperate. I would rather have been content to be her murderer, as she said, than to let her do that sin.

"You are not Sarah Mortimer," said I, as with great difficulty she wrote her signature. "It is a false name, and you know it is. Write your own

name, Countess Sermoneta, and let everybody know that you have disinherited your son."

She stared round at me, setting her teeth, then returned to the paper, and with a desperate resolution completed it. I stood perfectly aghast as I saw that dead hand trace those words, which to me cut her off for ever from every hope: "By marriage, Sermoneta." God help us! was there now no place of repentance?

"And now," she said, falling back on her pillows, "send me Carson — I want no more — no more from anybody; send me my maid. I'll forgive *her* though she deserted me; — nobody," sobbed the poor voice, all at once breaking and growing feeble, — "nobody knows me but Carson. I want my maid; Carson, here!"

She had scarcely spoken, when Carson was by her side kneeling down at the bed, kissing the cold hand held out to her with such tears and eager affection as I never saw a servant show to a mistress. It was a reconciliation of love. The tears came into Miss Mortimer's eyes. She gave her hand to her maid's caresses with actual affection. It was the strangest conclusion to that dismal scene. One after another we three went out of the room confounded. Aunt Milly weeping tears, the bitterness of which I could not enter into. Mr. Cresswell, with a face of utter wonder, and myself, too much shocked and shaken to be able for anything. I could not go downstairs with them. I took refuge in the room

that had been fitted up as a nursery for my baby. I got my boy into my arms and cried over him. It was too much; when he put his innocent arms round my neck and laid his cheek to mine to console me, my happiness struck me as with a pang. Oh, the unutterable things she had lost, that poor, miserable woman! I got up again to rush back to her with my baby, and see if that would not touch her heart, but stumbled in weariness and weakness, and fell on my knees on the floor. That was all that was to be done. I acknowledged it with that dreadful sense of impotence that one has, when hearts and souls have to be dealt with. On my knees I might help that desolate, lonely creature, — nowhere else, in no other manner. And even this not now. I was worn out with excitement and distress. I was ashamed to think, or permit myself to say, that one night's watching had done it. I had to put little Harry back into Lizzie's hands and lie down in the waning daylight. My head throbbed, and my heart beat, so that I could not even collect my thoughts. And all that had happened seemed to have left no impression but one upon me. I never thought of that group downstairs going over the wonderful story which nobody had so much as guessed at. I thought only of that hopeless woman, in her shut-up room, slowly floating out of existence, dying hour by hour, and minute by minute, unchanged and unsubdued. What was death that it should change her, whom love and pity, and the long-suffering of God had not changed?

But I thought to myself I could never more blame those who preach out of season as well as in season, and cannot be silent. There were moments in which I could not endure myself — in which I felt as if I must go and make another appeal to her — even at the risk of thrusting myself into the room, and disturbing the quiet of her last hours.

CHAPTER XX.

By Miss Milly Mortimer.

It is I who must finish what there is to tell. My dear Milly was not in a condition, either of mind or body, to go on with the story that had moved her so much; and since then, poor dear child, you may suppose how little heart she had to enter upon other things. We heard of the battle that had just been fought not long after, and knew that Harry was sure to have been in it, having got letters from him of his safe arrival just the day after my sister's death. And then we had to wait for the lists. I can tell nobody how we lived through these days. She used to go down and teach in the village school, and to all the distressed people near. The things she did for them might have shocked me at another time. Anything, it did not matter what, a servant's work, whatever there might happen to be to do — and came home at night tired to death, but with no sleep in her poor eyes. She used to say, though she could not sleep, that it was a kind of comfort to be very tired, it dulled her a little in her heart. When the news came he was slightly wounded, and had distinguished himself, she fell down in a faint at my feet. It was the first moment she dared be insensible.

After that little term of relief, our anxieties were constant. But at last, you know, it is all over, and he is coming home.

But to go back to that day. When we left my sister's deathbed, and I, without even Milly to support me, went down alone with them all to hear everything told over again, and all Mr. Cresswell's remarks and astonishment, you may well imagine it was very hard to me. I would have given anything to have been able to keep all that from Mr. Cresswell, but after what he had heard, and Sarah's extraordinary signature, of course it was indispensable that he should understand the whole business; as well as for my nephew's sake. I am bound to say Luigi behaved to his poor mother in a very different way from that in which she had treated him. If she had been the best mother in the world he could not have told the tale more gently. He went over it all, — how there had been a secret marriage done in in Leghorn, where it was not unlawful for a Catholic to marry a Protestant, and where his father came under some engagement to take our name. How it was kept secret for some reason of her own. How my father found it out. How the Count was summoned and called upon to bind himself, now that the affair could not be mended, to come home with them, and take the name of Mortimer. How, being dreadfully irritated by his wife (I don't doubt she could have driven a man mad, especially in the days of her beauty), he refused; and how she renounced, and

gave him up, and had nothing more to say to him. You may say, why did not he claim his rights? I can't tell. He might have ruined her reputation, to be sure, or made the whole story public; but I suppose she must have been more than a match for him. She retired away into some village, and had her baby, and left it there. Then she came home. The Count never disturbed her all his life; but when he died he told his son the story, and bade him never to rest till he had recovered his mother. The young man, all amazed, full of grief for his father and anxiety to find *her*, came to England, asking for the Countess Sermoneta. It was only after many failures, and seeking better information from his father's papers, that he came to believe that she called herself still Miss Mortimer; and we know all the rest. Luigi did not blame her, not a single word; he sat with his head leaning on his hands, overcome with distress and trouble. He called her his mother, his mother, every time he spoke, and said the name in such a tone as would have gone to anybody's heart. Little Sara sat gazing at him all the time, with her whole heart in her eyes. When he covered his face with his hands in that pitiful way, Sara was unable to contain herself; she moved restlessly in her seat, fell a-crying in extreme agitation, and then, just for a moment, laid her hand upon his and pressed it with a quick momentary touch of sympathy. Her father's eyes gleamed out for a moment surprise, anger, I cannot tell what mixture of feelings; but,

dear! dear! what had their courtships and love-makings to do in this stricken house? I could not bear any such question just at that moment. I told Cresswell that it was needful he should make my will, too, as well as my sister's, and that I left my share to my nephew, without any conditions. Cresswell made objections, as was natural for a lawyer. His objections were too much for me; I got angry and impatient, more than I ought to have done. Here was he pottering about proofs and such things, when I knew, and had seen, and read it all in my sister's face. This story was the key to Sarah's life; I understood it all now what it meant, from her never-uttered quarrel with my father, down to the time when she met Luigi on the road. And the man spoke to me about proofs! I made him draw out a kind of form of a will, like that which Sarah had signed, but which Mr. Cresswell worded so cautiously, that it would be null if Luigi was not proved my nephew — bequeathing all my share of the Park estate to him. I confess it cost me a pang to do this; I confess freely that, to part the lands, and to leave it away from Milly, and to think it was Sarah and not me who had provided for that dear child, went to my heart; but I would rather have died than refused justice to my sister's son.

Luigi came round to my side and took my two hands and kissed them. I was so wicked as to dislike it just at that moment, and to think it was one of his Italian ways. But he stood before me with

tears in his eyes, and that look of the Mortimers, which nobody could mistake. "And your love?" he said. I could not stand out against that; I broke down entirely, and cried and sobbed like a child. Dreadful days these had been! Now I was overpowered, and could do no more. When I rose to go upstairs Luigi drew my arm into his, and took care of me like a son. He begged me to go to Milly, not to be by myself; and I cannot tell how, but his voice had so great an effect upon me, that I did just as he said. Oh, dear! dear! to think what Sarah had cast away from her. There was she, lying alone, rejecting every creature in the world but Carson, — and here was the love that belonged to her, coming to *me*.

I did not see Mr. Cresswell again before he went away. Sara came up a little after, in despair, saying he had ordered her to return with him, and came and hugged me silently, and cried, with a frightened look upon her pale little face. "I would say farewell to godmamma Sarah, if I dared," cried the poor child; but I dared not let her do it. She went away, casting longing looks back at us like a creature condemned. It was natural that she should feel leaving us in so much trouble, and going back to her own quiet, motionless home. It was not Sara's fault she had not been watching with us every moment of that last terrible night; but, for all that, it was very right of Mr. Cresswell to take her away.

And then some days of watching followed. Once

Sarah admitted me into her room, and she saw the doctor without making any objection — she would have lived still, had that been possible — but when I begged her to see Luigi, just to say one word to him, to let him believe she recognised him as her son, her looks grew so terrible that I dared not say more. He went himself out of my knowledge, to her door, and begged and prayed to be let in; but Carson came out to him, pallid with terror, and begged him to go away, or he would kill Miss Mortimer — for they kept up that farce of a name to the end. Luigi came to me heart-broken; it was, indeed, a terrible position for the young man. He reproached himself for seeking his natural rights, and bringing on all this misery. He said, "I have killed my mother!" It was all I could do to comfort him. God forgive her! it was not he who was to blame.

This was how my sister Sarah died. I try never to think of it. I try not to remember that dreadful time. Thank heaven! to judge others is not our part in this life. There is very little comfort to be had out of it, anyhow; living and dying it was a sad existence for a woman. If she had not much love in her lifetime, I think there are few graves over which have been shed more bitter tears. On her tombstone she is called Countess Sermoneta; the first time she has ever borne that ill-fated name.

It was not difficult to prove the whole history. By degrees Mr. Cresswell gathered enough from

other sources to convince him of Luigi's story; and after that it did not take much persuasion to make him consent to give my nephew his daughter. It was not the match he might have made, of course. The Sermonetas are a very old family in their own country; not much wonder the Count would not consent to give up his own name, and take the name of the haughty Englishman that despised him. Luigi would have changed his, had his mother bidden him, and for his father's sake; but the young man was deeply grateful to me for not making any conditions. For my part, I did not want him to be the representative of the Mortimers. I may safely say I came to love him like a child of my own at the last. But after all he was a foreigner still, and even when I came to be fond of him, I never could see him without pain mixing with the pleasure. It was Harry, little Harry, my sweet English baby, Milly's beautiful boy, that was to be the Mortimer's heir.

And Sara will not be married till Harry Langham comes home. Perhaps it is not justice to Sara to say my nephew might have done better; but, after all, you know, her father is only an attorney, our family attorney. Her hair is grown now, and she is a little older, and very pretty very; pretty indeed the little creature is. She is not in the least like what my sister Sarah used to be; she can never be such a beauty as her poor godmamma was. If it were nothing else, she is too little for *beauty;* but I

must say she is extremely pretty. I don't know if there is such another in all Cheshire. My Milly is different. Of the two *I* should rather have her; but then I am not a young man.

And the war is over, and the dear child is nervously happy, and counting the days. About another week or so and Harry Langham will be at home.

POSTSCRIPT.

By Mrs. Langham.

HARRY is home, safe and well. He is to get the Medjidie and the French ribbon of honour; but you can see that in the papers. It is something else I have to tell.

It is just a week before Sara's marriage day, and Lizzie comes to me looking very foolish. I had thought she had recovered of her awkwardness. There she stands, twisting her feet again, rolling up her arms in her white apron, holding her head to one side in a paroxysm of her old use and wont. Really, if she were not standing in such a preposterous attitude, Lizzie would look rather pretty; she has such a nice complexion, and her red-brown hair pleases me — it is not too red. It suits those features which are not at all regular, but only very pleasant and bright, with health, and youth, and a good heart. But now there is something dreadful choking Lizzie, which must be got out.

"Mem, the Captain's come hame," came at last in a burst.

He was brevet Major now, and most people

about the Park called him Colonel; and he was in the next room, no further off, so I rather stared at Lizzie's piece of news.

"And wee Mr. Harry, he's a grand little gentleman," said Lizzie; "and a's weel, and there's no a cloud in a' the sky as big as the dear bairn's little finger, let abee a man's hand."

This solemn enumeration of my joys alarmed me considerably. "Do you know of anything that has happened, Lizzie?" I cried, with a momentary return of my old fears.

"Naething's gaun to happen," said Lizzie, "I'm meaning no to you; naething but the blessing of God that kens a'. It was just to say —"

Here Lizzie came to a dead stop, and cried, the unfailing resource in all difficulties. A perception of the truth flashed upon me as I looked at her.

"Do you mean to say —?" cried I, but got no further in my extreme amaze.

"Eh, it's no me!" cried Lizzie. "But eh, Menico says —"

Here she stopped again, gave me a frightened look, made an attempt to go on — and finally, startled by a sound in the next room, where Harry was, dropped the apron she had unconsciously pulled off, on the floor, and fairly ran away.

Leaving me thunderstruck, and by no means

pleased. I knew if I went and told Harry he would burst into fits of laughter, and there would be an end of all serious consideration of the subject. To lose Lizzie all at once like this, to let the creature go and marry a foreigner! There was something quite unbearable in the thought; what was I to do? A foreigner, and a Catholic, too, and a man twice as old as herself; the girl was mad! The more I thought of it the more distressed I grew. At last I went to seek Aunt Milly, who was the only practicable counsellor. She was in the garden, and I went out to seek her there. It was July, and sultry weather. In the hall, now better occupied than it used to be, stood Domenico, in the white suit, vast and spotless, with which he always distinguished himself in summer weather, and which always put me in mind of that dreadful day when the Count Sermoneta first came, in his own name, to the Park. Domenico started forward, noiseless and smiling, to open the door. That action brought before me in a minute our little Chester lodgings, our troubled happy days, our parting, and all the simple kindness this honest fellow had done us. His face beamed through all my recollections of that time, always thus starting forward with the courtesy of the heart. My heart warmed to him in spite of all I had been cogitating against him. Perhaps he divined what it was occupied my thoughts — he followed me out at the door.

"It pleases to the Signora give me the Leezee?" said Domenico, with an insinuating look. "No? no? But what to have done? The Signora displeases herself of me? Wherefore? Because? I not it know."

"I am not displeased," said I. "You are a very good fellow, Domenico, and have always been very kind. But she is a child; she is not seventeen. What would you do with her in a strange country? She is too young for you."

"The Leezee contents herself," said Domenico, with a broad smile opening out his black beard. "If it pleases to the Signora, I bring her back other times; I take the care of her; I make everything please to her. The Signora not wills to say no?"

And of course I did not say no; I had no right to say anything of the sort. And Lizzie actually was not afraid to marry that mountain of a man. She went away with him, looking dreadfully ashamed, and taking the most heart-rending farewell of little Harry and me, Domenico looking on with great but smiling sympathy all the while, and not at all resenting her tears. But the Captain had come home, and little Harry had attained the independence of two and a half years. Lizzie felt that she had discharged her trust, and was no longer imperatively needed to take care of me. I kissed her when she went away, as if she had been a sister of

my own, and I confess was not ashamed to add a tear to the floods that poured from her brown eyes; but I am obliged to avow that it is not within the range of my powers to put correctly upon paper all the long rolling syllables of her new name.

THE END.

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